Captivated

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Captivated

by Anonymous

Summary

Captor bonding. It's a passive psychological response to a new master. Been an essential survival tool for a million years. You bond with your captor, you survive. You don't, you're breakfast.

Will Graham is a trainee working for the FBI and Jack Crawford's last hope for catching the elusive Chesapeake Ripper. While investigating a potential lead on Jack's behalf, Will meets the Ripper face-to-face. But rather than kill him, the Ripper takes him captive, intending to use him to his own advantage.

But as time goes on, it becomes less clear just who has captured who...

Basically, a re-telling of Hannibal in which Will is Miriam Lass, and instead of (I presume??) keeping his victim in a medically induced coma in an undisclosed location, Hannibal falls hopelessly in love with him.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

There's three things I hate in this world . Jack Crawford can't help but think as he finds himself once more seated at a desk that isn't his, in an office he's become increasingly familiar with since the start of term last month. *DC traffic, serial killers, and upper management on a power trip* .

"-want to explain to me why this boy's still with us when he's failed *every* psychological evaluation that he's *ever* undergone-"

It's too early for this shit - Jack has a headache that's been slowly building behind his eyes for the past two days, sharp and pounding and almost impossible to ignore...

"-we have standards to uphold!-"

The particular pitch at which he's getting bitched at really isn't helping.

"-and don't even get me started on his performance in the classroom. For Christ's sake, Jack, he hasn't hit a *single* fucking target!-"

Jack isn't sure just what exactly he's done in a past life to deserve Kade Purnell, but he figures it must be something really bad, considering she seems hell-bent on making most things as unnecessarily difficult as humanly possible for him. It's the only possible explanation he can think of for how he's managed to find himself in this situation.

"-you vouched for this boy." Kade hisses at him as she taps two fingers on her desk. "We've made exceptions that we haven't made for anybody. And so far, I haven't seen so much as a shred of evidence that justifies our decision-"

"Will Graham's profile helped us catch the Minnesota Shrike!" Jack can't help but snap, his patience worn terribly thin by his impending migraine. "He has one of the highest IQ scores

that's ever been measured on this campus! You can't tell me that doesn't count for anything!"

"Will Graham is a remarkably bright young man." Kade says through her teeth, her thin lips twisted tight with fury. "With no doubt a very promising future ahead of him. But that future is *not* with us, Jack. Now, that's not to say he can't be brought in to help consult on a case from time to time, he might even be hired on as a professor for the Academy someday, but he will *never* be an agent-"

"When I brought Will in, I promised him he'd be an agent." Jack suddenly cuts in, panic fluttering in his chest. "That's the only reason he even agreed to this in the first place!"

Kade's purse-string mouth twists as she sits back in her chair, gazing at him coldly. She's quiet for a moment. "You shouldn't make promises you can't keep, Jack." She finally says, her tone leaving no room for either argument or sympathy as she closes Will's file with a snap. "Especially those that jeopardize our reputation." She turns away, leaning down to slip the file in the briefcase at her feet. "I want Graham gone *today* , Jack. He has no place among our ranks."

"Now, hold on-"

"You of course," She continues on, as though she doesn't hear him. "Will be subject to an investigation that will no doubt result in disciplinary action for your part in this fiasco-"

Not for the first time, Jack finds himself thinking that Kade Purnell just might be a psychopath herself, if the complete lack of empathy and borderline Machiavellianism are anything to go by. And as tempting as it is to tell her so, to match her tit for tat, Jack instead forces himself to remain calm - getting angry won't do him any good, and besides, there's far too much at stake to risk upsetting the higher ups any more than they already are. He takes a deep breath, and sits forward in his chair.

"Ms. Purnell." He tries again, a little louder than he had before. "We have a very unique opportunity here. There has never been a student like Will Graham before, and there likely never will be again. Hyper empathetic disorder is extremely rare-"

“Yes, I’m well aware of his ‘condition’, Jack.” Kade sniffs. “And I must say, I’m really not impressed by it. He’s far more likely to succumb to mental illness and resort to suicide before the age of twenty-one than he is of ever being any real help to us.”

“Will’s twenty-four.” Jack tells her softly. “He’s already defying the odds that are against him. Why not see just what else he’s capable of?”

“Because he’s a liability! We can’t afford to let him run around unchecked!”

“He won’t be unchecked.” Jack says firmly. “He’d be my full responsibility and under my constant supervision.”

“Oh, and that’s not an HR nightmare just waiting to happen.” Kade drawls, rolling her eyes.

“He’d be catching criminals - nothing else. He won’t be working alone, he won’t be in the field, and he most certainly won’t be doing without my direct approval.”

“Then what’s even the *point* of making him an agent if he won’t be operating as one?”

“Because we don’t have anyone who can do what Will Graham can do!” Jack says. He can’t understand why she doesn’t see that. “There’s no one who thinks the way he does, no one who can make jumps the way he can! Just look at what he's managed to accomplish already as a trainee!”

“Catching one killer doesn’t mean-”

“We had some of the best profilers in the bureau working on the Shrike for months, and not one of them could catch him. Will Graham did it in a day!” Jack reminds her, his irritation and his desperation mounting. “If we let him go now, we’ll be losing our best shot at catching the Ripper!”

That catches her attention. Jack watches as her eyes flick sharply up to meet his. “The Ripper?”

Jack hesitates, realizing his mistake, that he’s revealed too much, too soon. He bites back a sigh - the damage is done. There’s no point in denying it now. With a deep breath, feeling as though he’s about to launch himself off a cliff, he leans forward in his chair.

“You know the Ripper’s active right now.” He says, his voice low, as if he’s afraid he might be overheard by the very thing he’s been pursuing for the better part of his career.

“Who doesn’t?” Kade asks, and really, it’s a fair question - it’s been nearly a week since the first of the Ripper’s latest sounder, and there isn’t a single tabloid along the east coast that hasn’t mentioned him at least once. Everybody knows, it’s all anyone can talk about, wondering when he’ll strike again, and just who will be next.

Across her desk, Jack nods. “The Ripper always kills in sounders of three.” He says. “He’s already killed two. That means his third and final one will be any day now.”

“And you think Will Graham can catch him before that happens?”

“He caught the Shrike.” Jack reminds her again. “Just days after he took Elise Nichols. He can catch the Ripper too, I’m sure of it.”

From where she sits, Kade seems far less convinced. She’s already shaking her head. “Jack, we’ve been chasing him for almost twenty years. We’ve worked with *dozens* of the best psychologists in the country to try and catch him, and we’ve never even come close, even with every officer between Maryland and Virginia and DC on high-alert. And you’re telling me that you honestly believe a *trainee* is going to be the one to finally stop him?”

“I know he is.”

Kade's only answer is a huff, but Jack can tell that her resolve is beginning to crumble, and that's when he decides to finally go all in.

"If he does." He says, leaning forward once again. "If Will does manage to finally catch the Ripper and put a stop to all of this once and for all, would you be willing to make him a federal agent then?"

It's clear the question catches her off guard. She blinks rapidly at him. "An agent?" She echoes like it's the first she's ever even heard the term, as if it isn't precisely the very thing they've been arguing about for the past fifteen minutes. Jack's interrogated enough suspects in his time to know she's stalling, and while it's frustrating, he doesn't let it show.

He nods, expression blank. Across from him, Kade's jaw is clenched, and she slowly taps the top of her desk with a pen.

"If Will Graham were to help us catch the Ripper." She says at last, words halting and uncertain, reluctant even as they leave her lips. "I'm sure *exceptions* …could be made..."

It's the closest thing to a 'yes' he's going to get from a federal-level bureaucrat, and they both know it. Jack has to stop himself from smirking as he rises to his feet.

"I'll be in touch." He says before he turns away.

"Jack." Kade calls after him, and there's something in the way she says it that brings him to a halt. "The Ripper only ever kills in groups of threes. And always within a few days of when he starts." She pauses then, her lips pursed. "He's already killed two." She reminds him. "It won't be long before he kills the third. If he gets away, it could be years before we hear from him again."

As if Jack doesn't already know this. As if this simple fact hasn't kept him up these last few nights, hasn't fueled his obsession for the past twenty-some odd years…

From where she still sits behind her desk, Kade's not done with him just yet. "If the Ripper gets away from us again, Jack." She says, her tone like steel. "If Will Graham fails to catch him like you say he can, then I'm afraid it won't just be his career that's on the line - yours will too."

Jack hesitates, and keeps his back to her as he stands unmoving at her office door.

"I know." He says before he leaves.

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Will Graham is trying desperately to catch his breath, hands on his knees as he stands at the end of the obstacle course he's forced to run each day, when his instructor suddenly calls him.

"Graham! Graham!'

Will turns just enough to acknowledge that he's heard, sweat dripping off his face.

"Crawford wants to see you in his office." He's told, and Will fights back a wince, wondering what he's done now.

"Is he mad?"

His instructor shrugs. "I don't know, kid." He sighs. "You know how he is - seems like he's always mad about something or other."

Will would rather turn right back around and run the course again than hear whatever it is that Crawford has to say. Instead, he simply nods.

“Thank you, Sir.” He says, before he straightens to his full height, sweatshirt clinging miserably to his underarms and back. He jogs back to the Academy despite the burning in his legs and lungs, and it’s all too soon he’s knocking on Jack Crawford’s door.

“Come in.”

Will slips quietly inside, wishing he was anywhere but where he is and suddenly very acutely aware of just how bad he stinks.

“You wanted to see me, Sir?” He mumbles, shuffling self-consciously into the room. Behind his desk, Crawford looks up from the file that he’s reading, his expression hard.

“Graham.” He says, setting the file aside. “Yes. Sit down.”

Will does so, despite knowing it's a trap. He perches nervously on the edge of his seat as Jack Crawford stares him down. Or at least, he tries to - Will refuses to look him directly in the eye.

“I just got back from a meeting with Kade Purnell.” Jack growls after a moment. “Do you know what we talked about?”

Will can guess, but he’s not sure he can trust himself to say so without sounding like a smart ass.

“No, Sir.”

“We were talking about you.” Jack tells him, glaring at him. “And your future with the FBI.”

Will feels his stomach lurch at that. “My future, Sir?”

“Yes. Apparently, the higher ups have some concerns about you, Graham. Seems they’re not so sure they made the right decision when they allowed you in the program, considering you keep failing all your psych evals and haven’t hit a *single* target since you got here.”

Will’s pretty sure he knows what’s coming next. He looks down at his shoes. “Am I out?” He asks, convinced that despite his best efforts otherwise, he’s doomed to be confined to boatyards fixing engines after all.

Crawford snorts, rolling his eyes. “No, you’re not ‘out’.” He says, much to Will’s surprise. “I managed to convince her you should stay. She agreed…on one condition.”

The relief that Will is feeling promptly shrivels up and dies. “Condition, Sir?” He asks warily.

“You’re aware the Ripper’s active right now, yes?”

Will doesn’t like where this is going. “Yes.” He says reluctantly.

“And you know the things he’s done. How long we’ve tried to catch him.”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m sure you understand,” Jack says. “Just how important these next few days will be.” He sits back in his chair. “The Ripper is unlike any killer that we’ve ever seen - he’s intelligent, controlled, never leaves any evidence behind. Only kills three people at a time before he disappears without a trace, often for months at a time. It could be years before he resurfaces again once his current spree is over.” Jack makes a point to meet Will’s eyes. “Will. We have a real chance to catch the Ripper here. The higher ups know this. They’re desperate to finally put a stop to it once and for all.”

Will swallows, his throat dry. “What’s the condition, Jack?”

Jack seems irked that Will refers to him by name. “The condition is this.” He says. “You help us catch the Ripper, and the FBI will overlook all your obvious inadequacies that would normally prevent you from becoming an agent.”

“And if I fail?” Will asks, not sure that he wants to know the answer.

Jack hesitates. “And if you fail, you’re done.”

Will’s dread turns quickly to alarm. “Jack, I can’t!”

“Why not? You caught the Shrike-”

“That was different! Jack, this is the *Ripper* ! You couldn’t catch him with the best agents in the bureau - what makes you think I can?!”

“Because you can empathize with narcissists and sociopaths the way the rest of us can’t.” Jack says, as though Will needs to be reminded of this unfortunate fact. “We have an advantage with you we didn’t have before!”

“Jack.” Will says, his voice weak. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Will shifts jerkily in his chair, looking away. “Because I don’t know this kind of psychopath. I’ve *never* read about him - I don’t even know if he’s a psychopath! There might not be a word for what he is!”

“The Ripper is a sadist - that’s the one thing we do know about him. Sadists are capable of empathizing with their victims, which defeats the purpose of him being a psychopath, doesn’t

it?”

“Yes, it does.”

“ *So what kind of crazy is he?!* ”

Across his desk, Will’s quiet. “The kind that leaves a victim in a church pew, using his tongue as a page marker in the Bible that he’s holding.” He finally says, his voice soft. “The kind that rips his victim’s lungs out while she’s still alive and breathing. Whatever crazy that is.”

Jack doesn’t answer Will at first, just studies him with narrowed eyes. “If you had a better sense of just what exactly we were dealing with,” He says slowly. “Would it help you get inside his head?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Will heaves a sigh, rubbing at his forehead. “Any idea just how I do that?”

“Yes, actually.” Jack says, turning towards his rolodex. “I’ve been working closely with Alana Bloom since the Ripper reappeared.” He tells Will, flipping through the various cards inside. “Trying to build a profile. She suggested that I speak with an old colleague of hers.”

He finds the card he’s looking for at last and holds it out for Will. Will takes it gingerly, as if he’s half expecting it to bite him. He flips it over, studying the curling letters stamped across its surface.

“Dr. Hannibal Lecter?”

“He was Dr. Bloom’s mentor during her residency at Johns Hopkins.” Jack explains. “And is also considered an expert on human behavior and personality disorders. He’s very well respected within the psychiatric community. She thought he might be able to offer us some insight into what the Ripper is.”

“Well, I hope you’re planning on meeting with him soon,” Will says bitterly, handing back the card. “Because we don’t have a lot of time to spare.”

“I know. That’s why I’m meeting with him in an hour. I want you to come too.”

“I have class-”

“Not today you don’t. And not ever again, if you can’t catch the Ripper before his next kill. So, come on, let’s go.”

Will can think of nothing he’d like less than what he's being forced to do. He heaves a sigh. “I should probably go shower first.” He says, gesturing vaguely to himself before rising to his feet.

“Probably.” Jack agrees, wrinkling his nose. “I’ll pick you up at your dorm in twenty minutes. Don’t be late.”

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An hour later sees Will in Dr. Lecter’s waiting room with Jack, neither of them speaking as they wait for him to finish up with his last patient for the day. Dressed in his Academy uniform, Jack tense beside him in his stiff-backed chair, Will’s reminded of the many times he was called down to the principal’s office growing up, his exasperated father demanding to know what he’s done now. ‘Concerning behavior’, they’re always told. ‘Difficulty fitting in.’

Gentle suggestions that Will see a counselor they can’t afford…

His foot taps a staccato rhythm on the floor.

“Stop that.” Jack hisses after a while, shooting him a glare.

“Sorry.” Will says sheepishly, crossing his legs in an effort to keep them still. “I always feel a little nervous going into these places.”

“Why’s that?”

Will shrugs. “I’m afraid they won’t let me out.” He mumbles.

“Don’t worry, I won’t leave you here.”

“Yeah, not today.” Will scoffs under his breath, leg beginning to bounce wildly up and down once more.

Jack groans. “ *Will* .”

But before Will can even try and apologize again, Dr. Lecter’s office door suddenly opens. “Agent Crawford, Mr. Graham - please, come in.”

Will keeps his head down as he follows Jack inside.

“Dr. Lecter. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us.”

“Of course.” Dr. Lecter says, shaking Crawford’s hand. “I’m happy to help.”

He has an accent Will can’t place, and is dressed in an impeccably tailored, if not ridiculous, three piece suit. Will’s startled when he turns and offers him his hand, and avoids looking at him directly as he accepts it. From the corner of his eye, Will sees him smile slightly. He’s expecting him to comment on his strange behavior, but Dr. Lecter remains silent as he leads them to his desk, where two more chairs are waiting.

“Now,” He says, gesturing for them to sit, “You’re here about the Ripper, are you not?”

“That’s correct, Doctor.” Jack answers, and when he snaps his fingers, Will is quick to pass the file folder that he’s holding. He still won’t look at him, despite the fact that Lecter’s trying very hard to catch his eye. “We’re trying to build a new and better profile of him, based on his latest round of murders. Are you familiar with them?”

“I’m aware of them, yes.” Dr. Lecter says, flipping the file open and scanning the first document inside. “There’s a particularly gruesome image that’s been circulating over the internet these past few days. It’s all over the news.”

“Yeah, some genius in Baltimore PD took a photograph of the latest victim’s body with his cell phone. Shared it with his friends…and then Freddie Lounds posted it on TattleCrime dot com.”

“Tasteless.” Will mutters, disgusted.

“Do you have trouble with taste?” Dr. Lecter suddenly asks him, and Will tilts his head enough to see he’s still looking at the file. He hesitates.

“My thoughts are often not *tasty* .” He confesses.

“Nor mine.” Dr. Lecter tells him. “No effective barriers.”

“I build forts.”

“Associations come quickly.”

“So do forts.” Will says, risking another glance his way.

Across his desk, Dr. Lecter sets the file down, and turns his gaze toward Will. Will looks sharply away before their eyes can meet.

"Not fond of eye contact, are you?" Dr. Lecter asks him, almost kindly.

"Eyes are distracting." Will says with a huff, shifting anxiously in his seat. "You see too much…don't see enough. And-and," He adds defiantly, making a point to finally look him in the eye. Dr. Lecter smirks back at him. He seems amused. "It's hard to focus when you're thinking, um, 'Oh, those whites are really white', or 'He must have hepatitis' or 'Oh, is that a burst vein?'. So, yeah. I try to avoid eyes whenever possible."

Dr. Lecter chuckles, and he waits until Will has just begun to turn away before he speaks again.

"I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind." He says, his dark eyes locked on Will. "Your values and decency are present, yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love."

Every word is like a bullet, tearing Will mercilessly to shreds and burrowing deep beneath his skin, threatening to bleed him dry. It takes him a moment to speak.

"Whose profile are you working on?" He asks, voice weak with mounting horror. " *Whose profile is he working on?!* " He then demands, turning back to Jack.

"I'm sorry, Will." Dr. Lecter says lightly, sitting back in his chair. "Observing is what we do. I can't shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off."

"Please." Will spits, disgusted, " *Don't* ." He pushes himself quickly to his feet, glaring down at Jack. "I can't believe you pulled me out of a lecture about psychoanalyzing…just to have me psychoanalyzed." He snarls, turning on his heel and storming from the room. "If you actually need me, I'll be waiting out here."

Both Jack and Dr. Lecter watch him go, and it's only once Will slams the door behind him that Crawford heaves a sigh.

"Maybe we shouldn't poke him like that, doctor. Perhaps a less, uh… *direct* approach."

"What he has is *pure* empathy." Dr. Lecter tells him, leaning over his desk. "He can assume your point of view, or mine, or maybe some other points of view that scare him. It's an uncomfortable gift, Jack."

"Well, I'm gonna need him to *get* comfortable with it, or else we might lose our one shot of ever catching the Chesapeake Ripper."

Dr. Lecter's quiet, his expression difficult to read. "Perceptions a tool that's pointed on both ends." He muses quietly to himself before he nods once at the office door. "Send him back in, Jack. I think I can help good Will see this killer's face."

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Will has to force himself not to flinch when the office door flies open suddenly behind him.

"What do you think you're doing out here? Get back in there."

"No, I didn't sign up for this. I agreed to help you catch the Ripper, Jack, not let some stranger fumble with my head."

Jack looks furious as he paces back and forth across the waiting room. "Do you respect my judgment, Will?"

Will bites his lip, knowing that he can't afford to make things any worse for himself than they already are. "Yes." He says quietly.

"Good. Because we will stand a better chance of catching this guy *with* you in the saddle."

"I'm in the saddle." Will tries to tell him, his tone pleading.

"I don't think you are. That's why I asked that Dr. Lecter meet with you today, to try and get a sense of where your head is at."

And that's precisely the problem, because that's the absolute *last* thing that Will wants. Jack knows that, but then again, Jack's never particularly cared about what Will wants before, so why should he start now? Despite knowing it won't do him any good, Will glances helplessly at Jack, his stomach twisting nervously in knots.

"Please don't make me." He begs, voice no more than a whisper in the empty room.

" *Now* , Will."

Will heaves a sigh and drags himself across the room to Dr. Lecter's office. When he slips inside, Will's surprised to see that Lecter's no longer at his desk, but beside two chairs arranged to face each other.

"Hello again, Will." Dr. Lecter says, smiling warmly at him. "Please, sit down." When Will doesn't move, he cocks his head. "Come now, Will. God forbid we become friendly." He says, his tone teasing.

With a scowl, Will walks stiffly to the chair he's indicating, and Dr. Lecter waits until he's seated before he does the same.

“I would apologize for my analytical ambush, but I know I will soon be apologizing again and you will tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly.”

“Just keep it professional.” Will snaps.

Dr. Lecter inclines his head. “Agent Crawford tells me you have a knack for the monsters.”

“And therefore I need therapy?” Will bites, glaring at the doctor’s polished shoes.

“It would seem Jack Crawford thinks so, yes.” Dr. Lecter tells him, placid as the surface of a lake. “Though I would argue that this isn’t therapy. It’s whatever you need it to be.” When Will doesn’t answer him, he pushes further. “You know, Will,” He says, leaning forward. “I think Uncle Jack sees you as a fragile little teacup. The finest china used only for special guests.”

Will looks away, fighting back a laugh.

If only Jack knew.

“How do *you* see me?” He asks, his tone challenging as he risks another glance at Lecter.

The man’s gentle smile suddenly vanishes, and his expression goes unnervingly blank. “The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.”

Will feels a faint prickle of unease at that. He stares at Dr. Lecter openly now, his heart sinking.

People have long been fascinated by his ability to empathize with even the most twisted and incomprehensible of minds, curious to understand how it works. Psychiatrists especially have always been eager to pull him apart, to try and figure out what makes him tick, and Will learned early on to avoid them at all costs…

He knows exactly what they'd do to him if they ever realized what he really was, and if that in itself isn't reason enough for Will to be wary, the way that Dr. Lecter's looking at him now - almost like he *knows* - most definitely is.

He looks away, knowing he needs to be careful…

"I'm here to discuss the Ripper, Dr. Lecter." He says, voice icy. "Not me."

"Of course, Will." Dr. Lecter says, and Will's relieved he doesn't point out that Will in fact *did ask* for his opinion of him. "A far more appropriate question would be how do *you* see the Ripper? What is his nature? What do you know of him?"

"He's an intelligent psychopath." Will answers promptly. He knows this much. "He is a sadist."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he mutilates his victims. Tortures them, removes their organs. Often while they're still alive. They're aware of what he's doing."

"And is it sloppy? His work?"

"No." Will says, and there's a part of him, a little part, that's actually appalled that anyone could ever think that. "No, anything but. He's…precise. He knows exactly what he's doing."

"And what does that tell us?"

"That the Ripper has anatomical knowledge." Will says. This is nothing new. "That he's… probably a doctor or-or a surgeon or something along those lines."

“Yes. What else?”

Across from him, Will’s quiet. Because beyond what he’s already said, the Ripper’s little more than smoke and shadow.

Dr. Lecter waits another moment before he prompts him gently. “First principles, Will.” He says. “Simplicity. What does he do, this man you seek?”

“He kills people.”

“No. That is incidental.” Dr. Lecter sighs, and Will thinks he sounds a bit annoyed. “What is the first and principal thing he does? How is he choosing them? What needs does he serve by killing?”

Will shakes his head. “The Ripper has *no* traceable motive.” He says, frustrated. “There is *no* connection between *any* of his victims. That’s why he’s so hard to see.”

“For most people, perhaps. But not for you.”

“I don’t-”

“Think now.” Dr. Lecter encourages him, his voice soft. “What does he *do* to them, Will? Are these opportunistic killings? Taking the first available victim the first moment that he can? Random violence just for violence’s sake?”

“No.” Will says firmly, shaking his head. “No, each and every one of his murders were carefully planned and executed. Not a single detail was left to chance. They were… *personal* .”

“Why do you say that?”

Will bites his lip. Although he’s never actually seen a Ripper tableau in person, he’s seen enough crime scene photos to tell him everything he needs to know. “The way they were arranged,” He says slowly, “What he did to them…that was *disdain* . He saw his victims as *pigs* .”

“Then why did he display them the way he did?” Dr. Lecter challenges him. “Why not just toss their bodies aside like the trash he so clearly thought that they were?”

“Because he can’t *stand* even the *idea* of the banal.” Will says. He knows this, *he knows this* . How he knows this, he’s not entirely sure, but he feels it all the way down in his bones. “It wasn’t enough just to kill them, he had to transform them into something *better* than what they were.”

Across from him, Dr. Lecter doesn’t say a word. There’s a quiet intensity in the way he looks at Will. Will doesn’t understand it, and he’s not so sure he wants to. He looks away, shifting slightly in his seat. From the corner of his eye, he sees Dr. Lecter lean in close.

“I think you understand him far better than you know, Will.” He says, and Will can’t help but flinch at that. “In fact, I think you know him very well.”

“I don’t.” Will tries insisting, and even to his own ears it sounds weak. “Not really.”

“You will.” Dr. Lecter tells him,voice so soft Will has to strain to hear his words. “You have everything you need to catch him. If fact, I think you’re going to.”

Will scoffs. “Well, if I am, I’d better do it soon.” He says. “The Ripper’s already killed two. He won’t wait long to kill the third.”

“No, I would assume not.” Dr. Lecter agrees, rising to his feet. Will scrambles quickly to his own. “I would advise that you work quickly, Will.” Dr. Lecter tells him as he leads Will to the

door. “Your fate with the FBI depends on it.”

“Don’t remind me.” Will mutters, thinking bitterly of Jack’s deal with Kade Purnell, and the horrors that await him one way or another. He heaves a sigh. “I should have just stuck to fixing boat motors in Louisiana.”

Dr. Lecter’s lips twist into a smile. “Ships are safest at the shore,” He says, “But that’s not what they’re built for.” He then cocks his head, his smile gone. “Be careful, Will.” He tells him, his face grim. “You’re playing a dangerous game, and it’s in the Ripper’s interests that you fail.” He nods at the door, where Jack sits waiting on the other side. “I’m not so sure Jack Crawford understands that. And I have a feeling that the Ripper’s much closer than you think.” He then steps back, reaching for the door. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Will.” He says, beaming, as he pulls it open. “I look forward to seeing you again...”

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Jack Crawford waits until they’re out of Dr. Lecter’s office before he rounds on Will.

“Well?” He demands, glaring at him. “Anything?”

“He knows his victims, Jack.” Will tells him, the words tumbling from his mouth. He’s shaking, his heart racing in his chest. “He *knows* them.”

“Knows them how, Will?” Crawford says as he ushers Will outside. “We’ve done everything we can to connect his victims and they don’t have a single thing in common.”

“They have him.” Will says as they cross the parking lot to Crawford’s car. “He knew them somehow, and he despised them. They didn’t deserve to live, their mere presence was offensive to him. He planned their murders, maybe even years before he finally committed them, and he made sure they were poetic. We know he has a medical background of some sort. I think we’re looking for a doctor, a surgeon who may have treated the Ripper’s victims at some point, or had some other form of contact with them.”

“We’ve already checked that, Will.” Crawford sighs as they climb inside the car. “None of the Ripper’s victims ever shared a surgeon or any other doctor we could find. They didn’t even have the same dentist.”

“Well, then we’re obviously missing something.” Will says, convinced of this fact. “There must be *something* that we overlooked, something we haven’t considered-”

“Well, feel free to try and figure out just what that is.” Jack tells him as they pull away. “Because God knows we can’t.”

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Jack returns to Baltimore that evening, after he drops Will off at the Academy. Dr. Lecter’s invited him for dinner, as well as two other psychiatrists Jack’s very eager to see. By the time he arrives at Dr. Lecter’s house, the others are already on their second glass of wine.

“Jack!” Alana beams when she sees him, cheeks tinged slightly pink as Dr. Lecter leads him to the dining room. “We were wondering where you were!”

“I’m sorry if I’ve kept you waiting.” Jack says as he takes his seat. “Traffic.”

“It’s quite alright, Jack.” Dr. Lecter assures him as he fills Jack’s glass with wine. “There’s no need to apologize.”

“The three of us were just catching up.” Alana tells him. “It’s not often we have the chance to socialize outside of conferences.”

“Entirely my fault, I’m afraid.” Dr. Chilton suddenly cuts in, swirling his wine. “Being head of the State Hospital unfortunately takes up more time than I care to admit. I never know where the hours in the day go.”

“Your sacrifice is truly admirable, Frederick.” Dr. Lecter says as he begins to turn away. “I don’t know many people who would want the responsibility that you have.”

“Someone has to do it.” Dr. Chilton answers. Jack thinks he’s trying to seem humble, but all he sounds is pleased. “I’m just happy I can provide my expertise to those that need it most. Ah, your trainee, Will Graham,” He says, turning toward Jack. “Would benefit greatly from my services, I think. If you ever want to bring him in, I’d be more than happy to make time for him.”

“I appreciate that, Dr. Chilton.” Jack says, his gaze flickering to Dr. Lecter as he disappears to the adjoining kitchen. “But I have a hard enough time getting Will to sit for his mandatory psych evals, much less an actual therapy session.”

“Mmm. Trouble with authority figures.” Dr. Chilton tuts. “Indicates high levels of distrust and a lack of understanding. Was Will abused at any point in his childhood, Agent Crawford?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” Jack says. He’s not sure why he feels uncomfortable with this question. “But to be honest, I don’t know much about Will personally.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk about Will when he’s not here to speak for himself.” Alana says, glaring at Chilton from where she sits across the table.

“Why? It’s not as if we’d get an answer from him if he was. And besides, isn’t that exactly why we’re here?”

“We’re here because I’m trying to understand how best to handle him.” Jack tells them, sipping his wine. “The FBI has never had anyone like Will Graham before, and I doubt we’ll ever have anyone like him again.”

“I must confess, Jack, I’m a little surprised you even allowed him into the program.” Chilton says. “Someone like Will, someone incapable of differentiating their own thoughts and feelings from those around them doesn’t exactly meet the kind of stability the FBI usually screens for.”

“I would argue that Will knows exactly who he is.” Dr. Lecter says as he comes sweeping in the room once more, a large tray balanced in his arms. “He doesn’t have a personality or identity disorder of any kind, Frederick, but a remarkably vivid imagination. Beautiful. Pure empathy. Nothing he can’t understand and that terrifies him.”

“Which is precisely the problem.” Jack says as Dr. Lecter moves around the table, setting plates before his guests. “Will has a lot of potential, but unless he learns to overcome his fear, it will never be realized.”

“And what a shame that would be.” Dr. Lecter says, taking his seat at the head of the table.

“I would argue that the bigger shame would be to force Will into something he’s not equipped to handle.” Alana argues, frowning at him. “Will has to choose this for himself, Jack. The damage we could do to him if he’s not ready-”

“And when will that be, Alana?” Jack counters. “Will’s already twenty-four. Most people with Hyper Empathic Disorder don’t live even that long. Are we supposed to just sit around and wait for him to lose his mind because none of us bothered to give him the push he needed to get better?”

“No. But putting Will in an environment as stressful and demanding as the FBI isn’t good for him either. He shouldn’t be in the program, Jack. It’s that simple.”

“I agree.” Dr. Chilton drawls. “Will should be in a hospital receiving treatment, not chasing after murderers. It’s not good for him.”

Jack’s getting annoyed. This is not at all what he expected to hear when he asked them for their help. With a sigh, he turns to Dr. Lecter, hoping that he’ll back him up. “What do you think, doctor?” He asks. “You spent time with him today. What do you think’s best for Will?”

Dr. Lecter is quiet for a time, considering. “I think Will is his own person, Jack.” He says at last. “Perfectly capable of making his own choices. What’s best for Will is whatever he decides is best for him. Whether we like it or not.”

Jack is pleased with this response. “Well, I’ve asked Will nearly a dozen times already if he wants to quit and the answer’s always ‘no’. So, I suppose we must respect that.”

“The only reason he says ‘no’ is because his empathy won’t let him.” Alana tells him. “He knows you want him to say ‘no’, Jack, so that’s what he does. He can’t control it.”

“And until he does, he’s a danger to himself and others.” Dr. Chilton adds.

“Which is precisely why I’ve asked Dr. Lecter to help him.” Jack says, defensive. “If he can teach Will how to control his empathy, then he might actually have a real future with the FBI. Maybe even a successful one.”

“And that’s really what you think is best for Will?” Alana asks, turning her attention back to Dr. Lecter, "Spending every day of the rest of his life risking his own sanity for the sake of the FBI?"

From where he sits, Dr. Lecter looks thoughtful.

“I think it’s better than the alternative.” He says after a moment. “Don’t you?”

Alana huffs. She seems to know she isn’t going to win this argument. “I just don’t want Will getting too close. It could be catastrophic if he does.”

“Neither do I.” Dr. Lecter says. “Believe me, Alana, I only want what’s best for Will…and I intend to make that happen.”

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It’s hours later that Will is jerked from sleep by the sudden, high-pitched ringing of his phone. He groans, fumbling as it continues to vibrate across the surface of his nightstand, offensively loud in the otherwise still and silent night. It takes him another moment to finally grab it, squinting at the name that flashes on his screen. When he finally realizes who’s calling, Will feels his stomach sink. He lifts it to his ear reluctantly, knowing whatever he’s about to hear will be anything but good.

“Hello?”

“Will.” On the other end, Jack sounds grim. “Get dressed. I need you to meet me in the Academy parking lot in ten minutes.”

“Why? What’s happening?”

Jack hesitates, then heaves a sigh. “We’re too late, Will.” He says. “The Ripper’s killed his final victim.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s late when Jack calls him. It’s even later when he finally pulls up to the Academy parking lot. So late, Will thinks it might be more accurate to say it’s very early - it’s a little after four in the morning by the time they pull away.

Neither of them speak as Jack navigates the I-95 north to Washington. Outside, the late November air is breathtakingly cold. The windshield is fogging in the corners, and Will sits shivering in his threadbare jacket. Above them, the sky is a thick curtain of velvet black, without so much as a single star to be seen. Will thinks to himself that someday, he’ll have a house somewhere in the hills of the Virginia countryside, far from the light pollution of DC and Baltimore.

Though he’s a little unsure just how he’ll be paying for this fantasy house, and what he’ll be doing all day to afford it, considering he’s pretty sure he’s no longer an agent in training for the FBI. He’s honestly not sure why he’s still here, what Jack’s planning, but he doesn’t dare to question it. Instead, he sits huddled in his seat, hugging himself for warmth and trying hard to stay awake.

“We got the call at around three in the morning,” Jack suddenly says, breaking the heavy silence that surrounds them. “Price thinks the time of death was sometime between one and two. He’ll know more once we get the body to the lab so he can examine it properly.”

“Why haven’t you moved it already?” Will mumbles.

“I told them I wanted you to take a look at it first.”

“Me?” Will asks, bewildered.

“Yes.”

“But, Jack, I’ve only ever seen pictures of crime scenes. I don’t-”

“Well, now you’re getting the real thing. Fresh.”

“Fresh.” Will mutters. He can’t quite help but sound sarcastic. He blames his exhaustion. “Fresh as a daisy?”

“I’m gonna need you to prepare yourself for this one, Will.”

“I’m prepared.” Will says sincerely, and immediately wishes that he hasn’t. It’s not the kind of thing that normal people say.

“Well, prepare yourself some more. You’ve never seen anything like this.”

Will is quiet for a moment. “Kade Prurnell said this was okay?”

“As far as I’m aware, Kade Prurnell has no idea this is happening. She’s more involved with the administrative side of things than actual field work.”

“But she’s gonna find out.” Will points out. “And fast. And when she does…”

“It’s gonna be bad.” Jack says, nodding. “Yes, I know. Which is why I want you at the scene.”

“Jack-” Will tries to say before Jack cuts him off.

“It’s only a few hours old. Which means the Ripper can’t be far. We still might have a shot at catching him, Will. I need you to look for me. See if there’s something we can use.” He sighs. “I need this, Will. You need it. You know we do.”

Will knows there’s no point arguing with him. Jack’s already decided what he’s going to do, and that’s what he will do.

He swallows down a sigh.

It’s no secret that when it comes to the Ripper, Jack Crawford is obsessed. He’s been chasing him for over twenty years now, and still isn’t any closer to finding him than the day he started. Will can understand that (he can understand almost anything if he tries), but even he can see that Jack’s starting to get desperate - he can feel it rolling off of him like waves. Will hates the feeling. It makes the whole thing seem hopeless, like they’ve already lost and they’re just wasting time trying to convince themselves they haven’t.

Will shakes his head, and leans back in his seat.

He can’t afford to think like that.

He has far too much to lose if he gives up now.

The silence overtakes them once again, and Will dozes in his seat.

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Will’s not entirely sure where he is. He knows he’s somewhere between Baltimore and DC proper, but where specifically, he really can’t say. He’s spent the majority of the drive asleep, and missed the exit that they took to get here. One minute he’s dreaming of shadowy figures creeping through the trees that surround the Academy obstacle course, and the next, Jack Crawford is rapping smartly on the passenger side window.

“We’re here!” He calls when Will jerks awake, turning blearily toward him. Will scrambles from the car, and follows him past the flashing squad car lights and neon yellow ‘ *Do Not Cross* ’ tape that’s draped everywhere he turns. Cops swarm the scene, and Will thinks that they look shaken. He can’t really see where they are - the dark night and the glare of headlights makes it difficult to make out any details, but he thinks it might be a garage.

Jack leads him silently inside. Will’s hands are in his pockets, and his breath curls like smoke around his head. He should probably invest in a warmer coat, if he plans on being here long-term. The Chesapeake Bay is much colder than the southern climes he’s used to.

Jack stops abruptly, arm out to prevent Will from going any further. Will’s much smaller than Jack is, has to crane his neck to see around him, and even then, he can’t see much. They’ve come to a small room toward the back of the building, a workshop of some kind, if the tools hanging from the walls are anything to go on. Will can see people moving about, their shadows flung against the walls.

“Alright, people, let’s clear the scene!” Jack calls, clapping his hands, and it’s not long after that Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, and Beverly Katz trail from the room, glancing curiously at Will. Will ignores them as they pass him by. They’ve met before, however briefly, when Will was working on his profile of the Shrike. They’re the best the forensics department has to offer, and Jack insists on using them each time he’s called in to investigate a scene. When he’d insisted that Will meet them, Will had thought it was because he had plans for them to work together in the future, but now it seems that future’s not so certain. It’s probably for the best - he doesn’t think that Zeller likes him very much.

Jack waits until they’ve left the room before he turns to Will. “Brace yourself.” He says before he steps inside. Will follows after him, and is immediately met with the overwhelming stench of copper and rust, which hangs on the air like a shroud. Will tries to convince himself his stomach jolts from fear and not anticipation, but before he can, Jack moves away, and suddenly, Will’s looking at his first tableau in person. Will blinks, thoughts buzzing.

The Wound Man , is the first coherent thought he thinks, and if there was ever any doubt the Ripper is a surgeon, there isn’t any now. Will stands unmoving in the doorway, staring at the body stretched before him on the workbench, nearly every inch of it impaled with screwdrivers, hand saws, and all manner of everything else in between. Jack stays to the side, ensuring Will has all the room he needs.

“Just you and me for the time being.” He says, his voice encouragingly soft. “Take a look around here. Tell me what you see.”

Will hesitates, then moves further in the room. He circles slowly round the slab, studying the scene as the pendulum begins to swing behind his eyes. It’s not like the others - he can’t see the Ripper as clearly as he’d like. What Will divines is more suggestive than anything concrete.

“He did it all here.” He says after a while. He can tell from how much blood is on the table. “Did it while he was alive.” He cocks his head, frowning. “He struck the throat. So he couldn’t call for help.”

Jack cocks an eyebrow at him. “You think he was unconscious when the Ripper did the ripping?”

“No, he’d want him awake.” Will tells him, straightening. What he says shouldn’t come as a surprise - the Ripper is a sadist, after all. What’s also not surprising are the incisions on the torso. “Organs were removed.” Will says, nodding at the wounds. He’s pretty sure that Jack already knows this. “Not all of them, he was… *choosy* . He took the liver, the thymus, but left the heart.”

“What’s he *doing* with the organs?” Jack asks, and Will knows that it’s this that’s driving him insane. He shrugs.

“Surgical trophies.” Will says, uninterested. The Ripper’s not the first to do this. “We know he’s a medical doctor.”

Jack sighs. “Will...”

“Come on, Jack, it makes sense! Psychopaths are attracted to surgical fields. They offer power, and they require the ability to make objective, clinical decisions without feeling. The fact that he left us ‘The Wound Man’ makes it practically gift-wrapped!”

“‘The Wound Man’?”

“It’s a surgical diagram. First appeared in Europe in the fourteenth century. It was meant to be a kind of annotated guide of various injuries and diseases and their cures. In addition to that, the diagram also includes anatomical outlines of several organs in the abdomen. Including, among other things, the liver and thymus.” Will looks up at Jack. “He’s *mocking* us.”

Though Jack still doesn’t look particularly convinced, Will can tell he’s considering what he’s saying. “White male?” He finally asks, his voice soft. “Forties? Fifties?”

Will shakes his head. “I don’t know that he’s white.” He says with a frown. “But he’s exotic somehow.” A beat of silence passes before he speaks again. “The Ripper is a surgeon. We know he is. It’s how he got his name. Jack, we should pull medical records for all known victims. See if there’s anything we might have missed.”

“What you’re proposing breaks confidentiality laws. You know that.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re gonna get a warrant without anything substantial.” Will looks pointedly at Jack. “Or at least, I’m pretty sure we won’t. After all, I’m just a trainee, and I’ve missed a couple lectures since you started pulling me from class. I’m not quite sure how this all works.” Jack doesn’t answer him, but Will knows he understands damn well what he’s suggesting. He smirks at him. “Better a trainee ask for forgiveness than an agent ask for permission, right?”

“In my experience.” Jack tells him flatly.

“Well, then I hope you will forgive me for skipping class today. I have a lead I need to follow up on.”

Jack smiles, however slightly. “I’ll have Beverly Katz get you the list of surgeons we’ve compiled. I think you’ll find it helpful.”

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The sun is just beginning to rise when Jack drops Will off at the dorms, a stack of papers clutched tightly to his chest. He sprints across the parking lot, fumbles briefly with his key card at the door, and then goes racing down the hall and to his room. Will had a roommate at the start of term, but he dropped out the first week of the program. Will can't complain - since then, he's been alone.

Will kicks his shoes off at the door, and sets the list of names atop his desk before he climbs back into bed. His alarm is set to go off in an hour (a little after seven), and as exhausted as Will is, he knows that time is of the essence. Like Jack said, the Ripper can't be far, and it won't be long before Kade Prurnell becomes involved. Will is well aware that the moment that she does, his future with the FBI is over. If he has any hope of convincing her to let him stay, then he'll need to give her something they can work with, and in order for him to do that, he'll need to get moving.

But right now, he really needs to sleep.

He's out before his head can even hit his pillow.

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An hour later, and Will is rummaging through his closet for the only set of dress pants that he owns. The list of names Jack's given him is several pages long, dozens of doctors all scattered over a hundred miles between Alexandria and Wilmington. It will take Will at least two full days to interview them all, (assuming they're still practicing or even in the office), and if he has any hope of them cooperating, he knows he needs to be convincing. He can't just show up dressed in his uniform. He has to *somewhat* look the part.

Will doesn't own an iron, and even if he did he'd have no clue how to use it, so his shirt's just going to have to stay a wrinkled mess. He hopes his jacket will hide the worst of it. He tries his best to comb his hair, and decides to wear his glasses. He doesn't really need them - his prescription's pretty mild - but Will's knows they make him look older, and that he needs all the help he can get.

Dressed at last, Will grabs his wallet and his keys, and finally, the list of names before he leaves the room. He passes several of his classmates in the halls, but Will ignores them even as they glance inquisitively his way. Will's not popular, he never has been ('Doesn't play well with others' was a frequent critique on his school reports; he wouldn't be the least surprised to see the words 'Does not work well with others' on future performance reviews). He also knows that many of his colleagues don't like the special treatment they think that he's been given. They know he's not doing well in Firearms, and they know by now there's no way he'd pass the Academy's strict screening procedures unless someone intervened on his behalf. He doubts his absence went unnoticed yesterday, and the fact that he's now in a suit and walking briskly to the parking lot will surely be a topic of discussion later. If Will wasn't a pariah at the Academy before, he most definitely will be.

Assuming, of course, that he'll be coming back at all.

Will tries not to think about that as he climbs into his car, a dented Volvo that's nearly half his age. He's shocked it's lasted him this long, that it's taken him this far, and prays it can at least get him through the weekend and the extensive ground he has to cover.

He slips the keys in the ignition and lays the list of names against the steering wheel, scanning them. He's a little surprised at just how many doctors six people can accumulate in a lifetime cut abruptly short, though he knows he probably shouldn't be - Will would be suspicious if anything in his life was ever easy. He's not sure what the best way is to proceed is, or where he should begin - if he should start at one end of the map and simply work his way over, or if he should concentrate on the different doctors of one particular victim at a time. As Will flips through the pages, he's not surprised that there doesn't seem to be a single name repeated, but he is surprised to see a name he's seen before.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter - Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland .

It's enough to give Will pause.

He had no idea Dr. Lecter was a surgeon. Or at least, it seems he had been, at one time. He wonders vaguely why he quit, and more importantly, why he never mentioned it before, especially considering they had just discussed the possibility that the Ripper was a surgeon only yesterday. As both a surgeon and psychiatrist, Dr. Lecter could have offered Will

unprecedented insight into the Ripper's way of thinking, and yet he didn't. Why? It's a question that scratches at Will's brain and begs for his attention, but for now, he chooses to ignore it. There's easily a dozen different reasons Dr. Lecter could have had - perhaps he had been more concerned with helping Will to build a profile than he was chatting about himself and his past life. Perhaps he hadn't considered it important. Perhaps he thought Will understood enough already on his own, what with his degree of empathy and all. Perhaps his career as a surgeon had been short-lived, or unsatisfying in some way. After all, there must have been some reason why he quit and switched his focus to psychiatry - he doesn't exactly strike Will as impulsive. It's probably nothing…

Still, it might be something worth mentioning when Will sees him. Among the dozens of names Will has, Dr. Lecter's is the only one he recognizes, the only person he already knows, and Baltimore is relatively close. He'll start there. While he doubts that Dr. Lecter is in any way involved with these murders, perhaps one or two of the names Will has will stand out to him someway. Even though he might not be a surgeon now, he must have known these people at some point. He must have spoken with them, interacted with them to varying degrees during his time at Johns Hopkins. He may have known them, or at the very least, has heard about them. Maybe there's a few who had displayed some psychopathic tendencies, or one or two whose performance or career was concerning or suspicious in some way. Surely, if anyone can help Will narrow down the list, or help guide him where to go next, it's Dr. Lecter.

Will turns the key in the ignition, and the car rumbles sluggishly to life. As he reverses, Will catches sight of the Academy in his rearview mirror. The campus is bathed in an almost heavenly, golden glow of early morning light, and the sky above is a cold, clear blue. He's never thought of it as beautiful (in fact, with the bare trees and yellowed grass of late November, it's anything but), but even so, he can't help but to admire it. Will blinks, staring at the image that's reflected in his mirror.

This moment feels significant somehow, like he might not ever get the chance to look at it again…

Will shakes his head, and shoves the thought aside.

Thanks to Jack, he's currently on a race against time to catch a killer no one's ever even come close to finding in over twenty years. Every odd's against him, and if he fails, he'll never see this place again. Of course this moment feels important - that's because it is. That's all it is, and nothing more.

Even so, Will can't quite shake the feeling that he won't be coming back here as he drives away.

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It's about an hour from Quantico to Baltimore, but the Friday morning traffic adds roughly forty minutes to the drive. Will's more than slightly irritated by the time he pulls up to Dr. Lecter's office. He hasn't heard anything from Jack, and Will hopes this means he's managing to keep Kade Prurnell at bay, that he hasn't been expelled just yet. Truthfully, he's not sure how he's gonna make it out of this one. Kade Prurnell is going to find out the Ripper's made his final kill one way or another, and most likely sooner rather than later. Even if by some miracle Will does uncover who he is, he knows it might not matter. This wasn't the deal, after all, the deal was that he'd catch the Ripper *before* his third and final kill, not after, and while Kade Prurnell is many things, *lenient* and *forgiving* she is not. Even if Will does deliver her the Ripper, it might not be enough to convince her he should stay.

Will feels sick with nerves and hunger as he strides across the parking lot to Dr. Lecter's office. He hasn't eaten anything since yesterday evening, but he's gone longer without food before. Will's childhood was one riddled with times he went without, of trying to make ends meet between his father's spotty paydays. He's used to hunger. It doesn't bother him that much.

He could do without the spots he sees dancing in the corners of his vision, though, and the dizzy feeling that he has. Will's not sure if these are because his blood sugar's just low or because he's running on only a few hours of sleep, but either way, they're annoying, and he stumbles as he grabs the office door. It takes him a few moments, and several deep, slow breaths before he feels steady enough to let go of the handle. He feels weak and shaky as he slips inside, and it's only once he's raised his fist to knock at Dr. Lecter's door that Will realizes he probably should have called. He can't help but cringe - he's been incredibly *rude* - but before Will can get himself too worked up about it, the door suddenly opens.

Dr. Lecter seems surprised. "Will." He says, eyes widening as he takes him in. "Are you alright? Forgive me for saying so, but you look unwell."

It takes Will a moment to answer. “I-I’m sorry, I should have called first.” He says, taking a small step back away, but before he can get too far, Dr. Lecter shakes his head.

“Nonsense, Will.” He says, his voice firm as he pulls the door open further. “For you, my door is always open. Please, come in.”

Will hesitates a moment longer and then slowly steps inside.

“Now,” Dr. Lecter says, closing the door behind him. “What’s this all about?”

“Have you heard? What’s happened?”

“What do you mean, Will?”

“The Ripper’s killed his final victim,” Will tells him. His throat suddenly feels tight. It’s hard to speak - his voice is strangled. “We found him early this morning. Have you heard?”

Dr. Lecter twists his lips. “There may have been something about a murder on the radio this morning,” He says, “But to be honest, I didn’t pay it much attention.” Will’s not looking at him, but he can still feel the weight of his gaze upon him. “I’m sorry, Will.” He says, his voice soft. “I know how important it was to you that you catch him.”

Will shrugs. He doesn’t trust himself to speak.

“If I may ask,” Dr. Lecter continues cautiously, as though he’s trying not to upset Will any further. “Why are you here, Will? Did Jack Crawford send you? Do you need help?”

“I was…hoping to talk to you about a former patient.” Will tells him as he moves further into the room. “Someone you came into contact with…when you were still a practicing physician.”

Dr. Lecter looks surprised, in a vague sort of way. “I was unaware you knew I was once a physician.”

“Oh, I only just found out.” Will tells him as he looks around the room. He hadn’t paid much attention to it the day before, but without the stress to distract him now, Will finds his interest piqued. He wanders over to a statue of a stag, studying it closely. “Jack knows I’m right about the Ripper being a surgeon. He gave me a list of all the doctors who were involved at one point or another with the victims.”

“Ah.” Dr. Lecter says. “I see. Please, Will.” He gestures to the chair before his desk. “Come sit.”

Will obliges, turning reluctantly from the stag.

“I haven’t practiced for some time.” Dr. Lecter tells him as he closes the distance between them. “But luckily for you I have a very good memory. What’s the patient’s name?”

“His name was Jeremy Olmstead.” He says as he sinks into his chair. Across from him, Dr. Lecter cocks his head, considering, and then slowly seats himself.

“Perhaps not so good a memory after all.” He says. “I don’t recall a patient with that name. But it sounds familiar.”

“He was recently found murdered.” Will tells him. “We think he might have been a victim of the Chesapeake Ripper - the second in his most recent sounder.”

Dr. Lecter nods. “That’s why he sounds familiar. It was all over the news.”

Will nods back. “He had two old scars on his thigh.” He tells him. “Pathology checked with the local hospital. He had fallen out of a tree blind five years ago while bow hunting. Stuck an arrow through his leg. The doctor of record was a resident surgeon but you were on duty in the ER that night.”

“I was?” Dr. Lecter asks him, eyebrows raised ever so slightly in surprise.

Will nods. “Your name was on the admissions log.”

Dr. Lecter inhales deeply. “Let me think.” He says, looking to the side. He’s quiet for a moment. “You’ll have to forgive me. I saw so many people in the ER, but not so many hunters.”

Will nods again. He’s not surprised. “It’s been a long time since the accident.” He says. “But I thought you may remember if anything was fishy with the arrow wound.”

Dr. Lecter’s gaze is distant. “If it’s the gentleman I’m thinking of,” He says, “I vaguely remember a fellow hunter bringing him in, but I recall very little else.”

Will tries not to be too disappointed by this, but he can’t help but sigh. “I figured it was a long shot.” He says, and manages a small, tight smile. It’s only once he’s risen to his feet that Dr. Lecter speaks again.

“I did keep detailed journals during those days.” He tells Will, looking up at him. “If you’d like, I can get them for you.” He cocks his head. “Maybe you’ll find something helpful.”

Will stares at him, hardly daring to believe it. “That would be great.” He says, his smile slowly growing. “I-If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Dr. Lecter reassures him with a smile. “If you wait here, I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you.”

Will watches as he rises to his feet and moves around the desk, striding to the step ladder in the corner of the room. Will waits until he’s already ascended the first few steps before he

turns and wanders over to a nearby bookcase that's pressed against the wall. He studies books that are gathered on its shelves, the titles stamped across their spines, and it's as he turns away that Will sees a collection of drawings that have been laid atop a neighboring table. The topmost is a naked woman, with her back and buttocks to the viewer, and striking as it is, it's the image poking out from underneath that catches Will's attention.

He can make out only part of it - a human body, impaled by various objects to its legs and arm.

Will feels his blood run cold as he slowly reaches out and pulls it from the stack. There's no mistaking the image that's before him - 'The Wound Man', in all his awful glory.

Will had just enough time - a mere *split second* - to realize what this means, to know that he's in danger, but before he can do anything else, before he can even *begin* to think about what he should do next, he's grabbed suddenly from behind by the throat.

Will jerks away, or tries to, anyway, but the hands around his neck are strong and unrelenting. They only grip him tighter, then lift him up, and - desperate, panic stricken - Will kicks out wildly, knocking over the table as he does. The drawings go fluttering to the ground, where they immediately scatter.

Above them, Will is choking, clawing at the arms wrapped tight around him, and trying to grab at Dr. Lecter's face. His feet dangle just above the floor. He's barely getting any air. The spots that he saw earlier are back again, bigger than they were before and this time only growing bigger. Will can feel himself growing weaker with every passing second, can feel himself slipping quickly toward unconsciousness.

He's going limp…

His lungs are burning…

He needs air…

And then the darkness swallows him up, and Will knows nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

Updates probably won't be as frequent from this point forward. So far, I've been lifting a lot of dialogue and scenes from the show/books/movies, but from this point onward it's gonna be coming directly from my head, which means I'm gonna get stuck a lot more often now.

Hopefully the next chapter will be posted sooner rather than later.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Okay, gang. Before we go any further, I want to remind everyone that this is a kidnapping fic - from here on out, everything that's going to happen is gonna be non-con at its worst, and dub-con at its best (once the Stockholm Syndrome kicks in, anyway), so please keep that in mind.
>
> Anyway, enjoy!

The pain’s the first thing Will’s aware of when he wakes.

His throat hurts.

There’s a stabbing ache behind his eyes.

His chest feels tight.

He’s lying on his back, on something cold as ice and hard as stone…

Will has no idea where he is, what’s happening, or why he hurts so much. The last thing he remembers, he was…he was…

Will opens his eyes with a groan, and finds that there’s a light suspended directly above him, overwhelmingly, painfully bright. His groan turns quickly to a whimper, but when he tries to raise an arm to shield his eyes, he finds he can’t - there’s something wrapped around his wrists, something keeping them fixed firmly at his sides.

It's only then that it all comes rushing back - the Ripper's final victim, Jack's list of names, Dr. Lecter's office, 'The Wound Man', a pair of hands wrapped tight around his throat…

Will sucks in a single, horrified breath, jerking at the soft restraints that bind his wrists, and, glancing down, he sees that not only are his feet bound too, but that there are also leather straps across his chest and thighs, holding him in place. When he sees himself completely bound, when he sees that he's completely naked, and tied to what appears to be a stainless steel slab - '*an operating table'* Will thinks wildly - he begins to truly panic. He thrashes, gasping desperately for air and tugging at his bonds despite the fact it gets him nowhere. The light that hangs above him is the only one he has. Everything beyond the edge of the operating table lies shrouded in absolute darkness. He doesn't know where Dr. Lecter is, but he thinks he can't be far. Will pulls once more at his bonds, and when they hold, collapses back against the table with a sob.

He can't get out.

He's trapped.

And there's nothing - absolutely *nothing* - he can do about it.

He's going to die. He's going to die here. Any moment now, he's going to die.

Will's crying so hard he's choking on air, tears streaming down his cheeks.

He almost doesn't notice when a hand emerges from the darkness and begins to thread its fingers through his hair.

"Easy, Will." A smoke-like voice whispers in his ear. "Calm down."

Will jerks his head with a gasp, turning wide eyes to see that Dr. Lecter's standing over him, wearing what appears to be a plastic jumpsuit over his clothes. Will stares at him, his heart racing, utterly terrified. The angle of the light throws harsh shadows across the planes of Dr.

Lecter's face, making his expression impossible to read. Stretched across the operating table, Will lies trembling and helpless beneath him, remembering the Ripper's various victims and all the awful ways they died.

Above him, Dr. Lecter cocks his head. His face looks like a living skull. Will thinks he might be frowning.

"Breathe, Will." He murmurs, his voice no more than a whisper of sound in the otherwise silent room. " *Breathe* - you're going to make yourself sick if you can't calm down, poor boy."

If Dr. Lecter's trying to reassure him, he's failing spectacularly - to Will, his words sound like a threat, and he pants for air he just can't seem to get despite how hard his chest is heaving. Dr. Lecter's talking again, but Will can't hear what he's saying - there's a high-pitched ringing in his ears, and his vision's going in and out of focus-

He flinches violently when he feels something brush against his arm, and when he turns and sees the needle Dr. Lecter has, he chokes.

"No, no, *no!"* He begs, sobbing as Dr. Lecter brings the needle close to press against the column of his wrist. "Dr. Lecter, *please* , no!"

"Shh." Dr. Lecter croons, and slips the needle underneath the surface of Will's skin. "You'll be alright. *Shh* ."

Will's only answer is a sob. He looks away, sick with fear and refusing to watch as Dr. Lecter begins to slowly push the plunger down. Whatever's inside, it floods his veins in an instant, and it's not long after that Will feels himself go limp. He slumps against the table, blinking at the light that hangs above him. It seems softer than it was before, prisms of rainbows smeared around the edges...

"Hmm." He mumbles, eyes fluttering. "Pretty."

The air stirs faintly. For some reason, Will thinks it might be someone laughing. He suddenly feels very, very tired. He whines, wishing he could rub his aching eyes.

He can't remember why he can't.

"How are you feeling?" Someone asks him gently, and it takes Will a moment to realize that it's Dr. Lecter. "Any better?"

"Yeah." Will answers with a sigh, eyes slipping briefly shut. "Yeah, I'm…" He frowns, trying to remember. "'M…I'm sleepy."

"I would expect so. Sodium Amytal." He hears Dr. Lecter say, as though from a great distance away. "A barbiturate derivative, known primarily for reducing tension and anxiety, as well as lowering a person's heart rate to such a degree that with even a small dose, a state of complete relaxation is easy to achieve." Will can see him moving in the corner of his vision, and while he wonders vaguely what he's doing, he doesn't think to ask, or even turn his head to find out for himself. He's happy just to lie there, and let the sound of Dr. Lecter's voice wash over him. "In this state, a person is far more willing to answer any question he's asked, even those he normally wouldn't. Makes for quite an effective means of interrogation, wouldn't you say, Will?"

"Hmm." Will hums once in agreement, blinking at the lights. "The Nazis used it."

"That's right." Dr. Lecter says, beaming at him proudly. "Clever boy."

Will feels his lips flick slightly upward in response, mirroring his delight before collapsing to a frown. "Can I go back to sleep now? Please? I'm tired."

"Not just yet, my dear." Dr. Lecter says, and as he speaks, he gently cups Will's cheek in hand. "First, I'm afraid I need to ask you a few questions."

"Okay." Will mumbles, and then leans into his touch. Above him. Dr. Lecter grins.

“Good boy.” He purrs, thumb stroking back and forth across Will’s cheek, and after a few moments leans in close to whisper in Will’s ear. “Now, then. *Who knows you’re here* ?”

“No one.” Will sighs, eyes slipping shut.

“No one?” Dr. Lecter presses, turning his thumb so that the edge of his nail drags along the soft flesh of Will’s cheek. “What about Uncle Jack? Isn’t he the one who sent you?”

Will shakes his head. “He didn’t know where I was going.” He says. “I didn’t tell him I was coming here.”

“Who did you tell?”

“No one.” Will whispers. “*No one*.”

“What about your classmates?”

Will shakes his head again. He’s starting to feel a little nauseous. “No.”

“Why not?”

“No one to tell.” Will mumbles. “Don’t have any friends.”

“What about your parents?” Dr. Lecter then asks, and digs his nail in deeper. Blood wells beneath the surface of Will’s skin, and soon comes spilling down his face. “Do they know where you are?”

Will blinks, eyes burning hot. “No.”

Dr. Lecter lifts an eyebrow. “No?” He asks. He sounds like he doesn’t quite believe him. “Well, then, surely they’ll be very worried if they don’t hear from you soon.”

Will shakes his head once more, and finds he can’t hold back his tears. “They’re dead.”

Dr. Lecter doesn’t answer him at first. He merely blinks. “Both of them?” He finally asks, surprised.

Will nods, his throat too tight to speak. Dr. Lecter frowns at him.

“Am I to understand,” He then says slowly, “That Jack Crawford sent you - a *trainee* - to your death - *alone* - without so much as *asking* where you were planning to go and knowing full well you had no one in this world to miss you should you not return?”

Will’s breath hitches in response to this, tears streaming down his face.

Dr. Lecter shakes his head. He seems amazed. “I had wondered why Agent Crawford was determined as he was to have you,” He says quietly, hand moving from Will’s cheek to settle in his hair. “It’s not just the empathy - he couldn't have dreamed up a better recruit if he tried. You're everything he’s ever wanted in an agent and more, aren’t you?” He’s quiet for a moment, his fingers threading through Will’s hair. “It’s a shame I’m going to have to take you from him.”

“He’ll look for me.” Will says, because he knows this like he knows his name. “He’ll find me.”

“I have no doubt that he’ll *try* , dear Will.” Dr. Lecter says. “But he will *never* find you. Not unless I want him to.”

“He’s the head of the BAU.” Will whines, and tugs at his restraints. “He’s FBI. It’s his *job* to find people.”

“Jack Crawford has been trying to find me for over twenty years and he still isn’t any closer today than he was the day that he first started.” Dr. Lecter tells him, his voice soft, as if he’s trying to be kind. “You came to me on a Friday, Will, and you told no one you were coming. People won’t even realize that you’re gone until you fail to show for class on Monday morning. That’s three full days for me to make you disappear. By the time that you’re reported missing, by the time Jack Crawford even *thinks* to question me, there simply won’t be anything left for him to find.”

Will considers this, then swallows down a sob. “Are…are you going to kill me?” He asks, glancing at him fearfully.

Dr. Lecter doesn’t answer him. All he does is stroke Will’s hair, his lips curled faintly in the imitation of a smile.

Will turns his head, and shuts his eyes so he can’t see it anymore. “C-can I ask for just one thing before you do?” He asks. His voice is thick, so that the words he speaks are wavering and hard to understand. “Please? Just one thing?”

“You can ask.” Dr. Lecter says, amused, and Will hears his implication loud and clear - he’s free to ask, but that doesn’t mean Dr. Lecter’s going to give him what he wants. It’s the kind of cruelty that only the Ripper is capable of, and it takes Will another moment before he trusts himself to speak.

“When you finally kill me,” He says at last, as firmly as he can. “Can you please just make it quick?” His lip wobbles, and he fights to hold himself together. He knows what Dr. Lecter’s capable of, the kinds of things he’s done, and it's the torture that he fears the most. ”P-Please?”

Will knows better than to look at him. He knows it won’t do him any good if he does - the Chesapeake Ripper is an abyss, an evil that’s too great to be contained, and Will knows if he stares at it long enough, that evil will surely gaze back directly into him. He waits with bated breath, but after several agonizing moments pass in silence, he breaks. Will risks a glance at

Dr. Lecter's face, and sees it hasn't changed at all. Dr. Lecter smirks, and cards his fingers through Will's hair before he leans down to whisper in his ear.

"I'm not going to kill you, Will." He says, breath hot against Will's puckered skin. "At least…not yet. The world is far more interesting with you still in it, I'm afraid."

Will trembles at his words, and Dr. Lecter clicks his tongue.

"Will," He cooes, as though he's talking to a child, and takes Will's face between his hands. "Remarkable boy. Why ever are you crying?"

Will sobs. "I'm scared." He manages to say. "*I'm really scared!*"

"Yes, I'm quite sure that you are." Dr. Lecter murmurs calmly before he finally pulls away. "After all, you have every reason to be, don't you?"

Will nods, absolutely miserable. He watches silently as Dr. Lecter prepares his next syringe.

"W-what is that?" He whimpers, cringing on the table.

"Just a little something to help you sleep." Dr. Lecter tells him, soothingly. "I think you've had enough excitement for today, don't you?"

Will sniffs, considering. "Mmm-hmm." He hums, nodding tiredly again, and Dr. Lecter smiles.

"Good." He whispers, and Will barely feels a thing when he injects him for a second time. By the time that Dr. Lecter pulls the needle free, Will's very nearly drifted off to sleep. His eyes flutter only slightly when he feels something brush against his curls.

“Good night, good Will.” Dr. Lecter says as he runs his fingers through Will’s hair. “Sweet dreams, and enjoy them while you can.”

Will sighs as Dr. Lecter gently pats him on the head.

“I doubt you’ll ever know such sweet and easy peace again.” Is the last thing that he hears before he falls asleep.

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Awareness comes slowly, in bits and pieces. There isn’t much at first, just vague sensations - softness. Warmth. Faint touches, and memories of a distant, lilting murmur, words he just can’t seem to grasp despite how hard he tries…

For a long time, Will lies drifting in and out of sleep, his thoughts fleeting, hard to catch, and his body heavy with exhaustion.

It seems like an entire lifetime passes before he manages to open his eyes, and when he finally does, Will blinks at what he sees.

He’s lying on a bed with metal rails along its sides. He's underneath a mound of blankets, the hems pulled to his chin. There’s an IV pole to the side, and despite its presence, Will’s relieved to see that he doesn’t appear to have been fitted with one. His arms are free - no needles, no restraints of any kind, and for one wild moment, Will thinks that he’s been found, that he’s been saved, that he’s been taken to a hospital-

But then he shifts a bit, and the moment that he moves, he hears a metal clinking answer from somewhere by his feet. Will clumsily pushes his blankets away, and sees that he’s been dressed in a bulky hospital gown, with ties along the sides. Beneath the gown, he’s bare. A thick, absorbent pad of some kind has been tucked beneath his hips. And wrapped around his ankle is a cuff, secured by a small padlock and trailing a thin chain that disappears over the edge of his bed to the floor.

Will's stomach drops sharply at the sight, and his blood runs cold with fear. For a moment, he can only sit there shaking, gasping quietly for air and glancing nervously around the room.

There are no windows, no sunshine, only fluorescent lights that hum softly overhead. Across from Will, there's a wall of reinforced glass panels, stretching from the ceiling to the floor. Will shrinks away, feeling terribly exposed. Whatever lies beyond them, it's too dark for him to see, but Will wouldn't be the least surprised if Dr. Lecter was somewhere on the other side, lurking just beyond his sight…

Watching…waiting…

Shivering at the thought, Will curls protectively around himself as best he can, trying to shield himself from view. He turns back to his room, forcing himself to ignore the awful, see-through wall and all the shadows that hang heavy just outside it. Beyond Will's bed and IV pole, there's a toilet and a sink, and it's only once he sees them that Will realizes just how bad he needs to piss. He groans, but doesn't dare climb from the bed to use them - between the glass and the strange, red light he sees blinking in the corner, Will knows he's being watched. Instead, he bites back bitter tears and continues studying the room.

There isn't much to look at beyond the three bare walls and tiled floor. There's a chair and rolling cart nearby, and a tall cabinet against the wall opposite from Will. Every door and drawer is fitted with a shiny, silver lock, and even if they weren't, Will doesn't think the chain around his ankle is long enough to reach them. He wonders what's inside them, and just what Dr. Lecter plans to *do* with what's inside them, and knows whatever it is, it can't be something good. He said before he wasn't going to kill him, but that doesn't reassure Will in the slightest - the Ripper is both a sadist and a doctor, after all, which means there probably isn't much Will can't survive so long as Dr. Lecter wants him to. He could take Will apart piece by piece and then just as easily put him back together again. Drive him to the brink of sanity and death just to drag him back at the last minute. Torture him until Will begs for death and then deny him his request for the sake of simply being cruel. Keep him going for months, or even years, with IVs and tourniquets, and all manner of other nightmarish equipment in between, until Will is nothing but a wasted shell of everything that he once was, a sad and broken doll to be discarded when his usefulness has finally run its course.

Only then will Dr. Lecter kill him, only then, when Will's lost all entertainment value for him and is too far gone to care what happens to him next…

The sob that Will's been holding back comes spilling out at last, and Will curls into a ball, hugging his knees to his chest and gasping wildly for breath. He doesn't know how long he sits there, choking on his misery, but by the time Will feels something brush his arm, he's nearly cried himself to sleep.

He's awake in an instant, and jerks back with a gasp when he sees Dr. Lecter leaning over him, his expression twisted into something like concern. He watches as Will quickly scrambles back, chest heaving, eyes opened wide with fear. He doesn't speak, he simply waits, and after a few moments pass, he offers Will a reassuring smile.

"Good morning, Will." He says, voice gentle, and if it were anybody else, Will would bristle at his tone. "I trust you slept well."

Will doesn't answer, but Dr. Lecter doesn't seem to be expecting a response. He reaches down, and unlocks the railing on Will's bed.

"Are you hungry?" He asks as he folds it down. "You must be. You haven't eaten anything since yesterday at least, and you were already dreadfully thin to begin with." He turns away, and it's only then that Will notices the bed tray that's sitting on the rolling cart nearby. "Here we are." Dr. Lecter says, setting the tray carefully down at the foot of Will's bed. "A little protein scramble to start the day. Some eggs, some sausage."

He steps back, gazing expectantly at Will as he settles himself in the chair beside the bed. Will stares back at him, still wedged against the corner of his bed, then glances anxiously at the tray placed at his feet. The food that Dr. Lecter's brought him looks like something from a magazine, and it smells like something from a dream. Will swallows, his throat dry.

He hasn't eaten anything since Thursday afternoon. It's at least Saturday now, and Will is nothing short of starving. But as hungry as he is, he doesn't dare move any closer or even entertain the possibility of eating. He has no idea what Dr. Lecter's done to it, if he's mixed his eggs with sedatives or poison, and he doesn't trust him to be honest if he asks. So, instead of digging in, instead of doing anything at all, Will just simply sits there, terrified.

Beside him, Dr. Lecter cocks his head.

“Will?” He asks. “Are you alright?”

Will doesn’t answer him. He just curls up even tighter on himself, and wishes he was anywhere but where he was. Dr. Lecter waits, but after several uneventful moments pass, rises slowly to his feet.

“My apologies, Will.” He says. “It was never my intention to make you so uncomfortable. I’ll leave you alone for now, but please,” He nods at the tray, “Finish your breakfast. I’ll be back again with lunch in a few hours. And if there’s anything you need before then,” He gestures to the light that’s blinking in the corner. “Just ask.” He smiles slightly. “Alright?”

He doesn’t wait for a response, he just simply turns around and leaves. Will watches as he goes, eyeing Dr. Lecter warily as he closes the short distance to the door. It opens smoothly at his touch, and Dr. Lecter’s quick to pull it shut again before he locks the door behind him. He disappears into the shadows just beyond Will’s room, and it’s only once his footsteps have faded into silence that Will allows himself to slump against his pillows, trying not to cry.

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True to his word, Dr. Lecter returns a few hours later with a second tray. Will doesn’t move an inch when he comes in. He can’t - between the fact that he hasn’t eaten anything in two days and the fact his bladder feels as if it’s going to burst, he’s in far too much pain to even try. When Dr. Lecter sees Will curled up on his bed, he frowns.

“Have you moved at all since I left?” He asks, moving further in the room and setting the second tray on the cart. Will tenses as he comes closer, and when Dr. Lecter spies his untouched breakfast, he heaves a sigh. “Will.” He says, shaking his head. “You know you need to eat. Come on now, sit up for me, please.”

But Will cringes back, shaking his head. “I’m not hungry.” He tries to tell him, and Dr. Lecter’s face immediately darkens into something ugly.

“I’m afraid I really must insist, Will.” He says, his tone hard, and it’s the only warning Will has before he suddenly grabs for him.

Will cries out, jerking away from him, and as he does, he feels the muscles in his bladder finally give. Warm piss bathes him in an instant, soaking the hospital gown he's wearing and running down his thighs to flood the pad he's sitting on. For a moment, Will is so shocked by what he's done that he feels nothing else, but then the reality of what's just happened hits him (along with the smell) and humiliation catches up with him at last. He risks a glance at Dr. Lecter's face. He seems surprised, and it doesn't reassure Will in the slightest. In fact, it only substitutes his embarrassment with fear. He whimpers, and once more curls into a ball, hiding his face in his arms. Above him, Dr. Lecter sighs. Will holds his breath, expecting the worst, and then, to his amazement, he hears Dr. Lecter turn and move away. Will peeks up at him, watching as he crosses over to the cabinet in the corner of the room. Without a word, Dr. Lecter pulls a washcloth from inside and then takes it to the sink. He wets the cloth, and pumps several squirts of antibacterial soap into its folds before he works it in his hands, creating a thick lather. He returns to Will a moment later, who watches silently.

"We need to get you out of those wet clothes. Can you sit up for me?" Dr. Lecter asks him, and when Will doesn't move, he slowly reaches out to undo the ties that hold his gown in place. Will whimpers, clinging to it tight, but Dr. Lecter pulls it easily away. Will immediately tucks his legs in close, trying to shield himself from view.

"Stay over the pad." Dr. Lecter tells him, tossing the ruined gown aside. "I'm going to let you wash yourself. Can you do that?"

Will hesitates, then nods. Dr. Lecter offers him the cloth. "Make sure you wash yourself well, Will. I doubt you'll like the consequences if you don't."

Trembling, Will nods to show he understands, and once Dr. Lecter turns his back, lifts himself up off the pad to wash between his legs. As he works, Dr. Lecter retrieves another gown and pad for him.

"I don't need that!" Will whines when he returns, glaring at the pad he's holding in his hand.

"It's just a precaution, Will." Dr. Lecter says as he unfolds it. "Are you finished?"

Will looks away, ashamed, and nods.

“Good. Lift your hips for me.”

Too terrified to protest, Will quickly obeys, blushing furiously as Dr. Lecter pulls the wet pad out from under him and then slips the new one in its place. Once it’s laid, he motions for Will to lower himself back down, ignoring his unhappy expression as he does. It’s only after Will is settled on the pad that Dr. Lecter covers him back up.

“There.” Dr. Lecter says, draping Will with the gown and tying it shut. “Much better.”

Will sits quiet on his bed, avoiding his eyes, and Dr. Lecter sighs.

“You’re not in trouble, Will.” He tells him. “I’m not going to punish you. All I’m going to do is ask that you use the toilet when you need to.”

Will answers with a pointed glare at the light that’s still blinking in the corner. Dr. Lecter glances at it, and then looks back at Will.

“The camera’s angled so I can’t see the toilet, Will.” Dr. Lecter tells him gently. “I assure you, you have complete privacy, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Will wants so bad to ask him how anyone could say that with a straight face when he’s literally being kept behind glass, but decides it would be better if he keeps that statement to himself. He remains silent, and when Dr. Lecter brings him his lunch, he stubbornly ignores him.

Dr. Lecter inhales a long, deep breath.

“I understand that this is difficult for you, Will.” He says, setting the tray back on the cart and rolling it within reach. “And that you’re scared, but please believe me when I say that I only want what’s best for you. If you don’t cooperate, if you won’t eat, if I think that what you're

doing is endangering your health in *any* way, then I'll do whatever needs to be done to prevent you from hurting yourself. Whether you like it or not." He pauses then, allowing the full weight of what he's saying to sink in. "Am I clear?"

Will bites his lip, blinking rapidly. Dr. Lecter waits patiently for his response, and once Will nods, he finally steps back.

"Good boy." He says, nodding at the tray. "Eat your lunch, Will. I'll be back in a few hours with dinner. In the meantime, please enjoy."

Will doesn't move until after Dr. Lecter leaves, and it's only then that he shuffles to the edge of the bed, lifting the tray up off the cart and placing it over his lap. Will stares down at the tray, at the bowl of chicken soup that sits there looking back at him, wishing it would disappear despite his awful hunger. He manages a few spoonfuls and then sets the tray aside, refusing to eat any more. When Dr. Lecter returns a few hours later and sees how little he has eaten, he sighs.

"Will."

"I ate!" Will cries defensively, cowering away from him. "I did, I swear I did! I ate!"

"Not nearly enough." Dr. Lecter says. He's frowning again, but he seems more puzzled than annoyed. He's quiet for a moment, studying him. "Tell me, Will - are you refusing to eat because you feel it's the only form of protest that you have, or is it because you genuinely can't? Are you ill? Do you have any allergies I need to know about?"

Will hesitates, refusing to meet his eyes. "Can't." He says at last.

"Why not?"

Will shrugs. "Just can't." He tells him, picking nervously at a loose thread on his gown. It's not quite the truth, but it isn't exactly a lie either. He thinks that Dr. Lecter knows this, though

his expression remains unnervingly blank.

“I see.” He says, and he considers Will for a long moment. “Why don’t we make a deal, Will?” He says at last.

Will tenses immediately at that. “A deal?”

“Yes. If you agree to eat your meals, I’ll reward you for your good behavior.”

“Reward me how?” Will asks warily.

Dr. Lecter shrugs. “Clothes. Books to keep you occupied. Perhaps I’ll remove your ankle cuff, or even turn the camera off for good. It all depends on how willing you are to cooperate with me.”

Will swallows, his throat dry. “And if I refuse?”

Dr. Lecter cocks an eyebrow at him. “Then I’ll have no choice but to place a feeding tube.” He says, as though it’s obvious.

Will jerks as though he’s been slapped, staring at him in horror. Dr. Lecter gazes coldly back.

“Eat your dinner, Will.” He says, taking Will’s now lukewarm soup and bearing it away. “Please. I’d hate to perform a gastrostomy at this ungodly hour.”

He leaves Will shaking on his bed, too terrified to move. It takes him several minutes before he feels brave enough to try and eat his dinner, and nearly twice that time to finish even half of it. It’s the most Will’s eaten in two days, and even so, he can barely stomach it, convinced that it’s the last meal that he’ll ever eat. When he can force no more into his anxious stomach, Will shoves the tray away and curls up on his side, pressing himself against the railing of his bed in a vain attempt to protect himself as best he can.

It’s not long before Will finds himself fighting sleep with everything he has. His eyes are heavy, his thoughts are hazy, and Will thinks that Dr. Lecter might have drugged him again, but before he can ponder it too closely, he’s already drifted off.

He surfaces briefly when he feels someone drape a blanket over him.

“Shh.” A familiar voice murmurs. “Go back to sleep, Will.”

Too tired to argue, Will simply nods.

He’s asleep a moment later.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wakes up feeling sluggish, like he's still somewhat half-asleep, and with an awful taste in his mouth. He struggles to sit up, cursing Dr. Lecter the entire time.

He had wondered last night if he'd drugged him. Now he's sure.

With an oath that would have made a seasoned sailor blush, Will finally manages to haul himself upright, his head spinning as he does. He closes his eyes, and spends several minutes slumped against the railing of his bed as he tries to will the nausea and the dizziness away. It's only once he's starting to feel better that Will realizes he really, *really* needs to pee.

With a groan, Will slowly, cautiously, pulls himself up over the rail. He's clinging to it tightly as he lowers himself down to the floor. The tile is ice cold against his bare feet and his legs are threatening to give out from under him as he straightens to his full height. Will grits his teeth and clutches at the railing with white-knuckled desperation, inching his way carefully down the side of the bed to the foot, legs shaking violently every step of the way.

The chain that's anchored to his cuff follows faithfully behind him like a dog, rattling cheerfully as it drags across the tile. Will shuffles along the edge of the bed, sweating and scowling the entire time.

It takes a while, and no small amount of swearing, but Will eventually manages to maneuver himself to the far corner of the room, where the toilet and sink sit waiting. He keeps one hand on the wall as he positions himself in front of the bowl, and glances at the camera light that's still blinking just above him.

He hesitates.

Dr. Lecter said that it was angled so that he couldn't see him, but Will's not quite sure that believes him.

Even so, the last thing that he wants is a repeat of yesterday's humiliation...

Will swallows, and forces himself to ignore the blinking light. He adjusts himself and aims.

The sound of liquid hitting liquid seems offensively loud in the otherwise silent room, and Will finishes as quickly as he can, tucking himself back under the gown before he totters over to the bed again. He collapses at the foot, and then spends several minutes half-slumped across the mattress, panting with exhaustion. He doesn't think he'll be able to climb back over the railing again. He doesn't *want* to climb back over the railing again. As tired as he is, Will knows he needs to explore the room, or try to anyway, considering his limitations. The better he knows the layout, the more comfortable he is here, the better chances he has of finding a way out.

He takes a moment to gather himself, and once he feels he's caught his breath, pushes himself back up again.

He starts with the chain. It's thin, lightweight, almost slinky in his hands, but even so, it's far from fragile. Will knows it won't break easy - not without help, anyway - and he doubts that Dr. Lecter would be so careless as to leave a pair of bolt cutters within reach. He sighs, tugging at it half heartedly. The chain's been threaded through the buckle on his cuff, and is secured by both a padlock and a pin. The other end disappears beneath the bed, and Will drops slowly to his hands and knees to find it. He's surprised to see his bed has wheels, all four of which are locked. Less surprising is that the other end of the chain has been wrapped around a stainless steel eye bolt, which appears to have been drilled beneath the tile into concrete. He sighs again - no way that's coming free.

It's hard not to be discouraged, and Will tells himself he's not (even if he is) as he rises slowly to his feet. He feels steadier now than he did before, and he takes a few hesitant steps from the bed. The chain is only about four, maybe five feet long - he has just enough lead to reach the toilet and the middle of the room, but no farther. The cabinet and rolling cart are up against the opposite wall. He can't reach them, even if he stretches out his arm as far as it will go. It's disappointing; he's sure there's something inside that he could use to slip his cuff - either a needle to help him pick the lock or a scalpel sharp enough to cut the strap, or maybe something he could use to break the chain, but even if there is, Will knows it's not enough.

Even if he does somehow escape his leash, it doesn't change the fact that he's still trapped inside the room. That he still has to find a way outside...

Still has to get past Dr. Lecter first…

Will shudders at the thought before he turns and picks his way to the nearest wall. It's concrete, cold and firm, and as he runs his hands along the smooth expanse, Will thinks he must be in a basement. It would explain why there aren't any windows, why it's so dark beyond the glass panels that comprise the fourth wall of his cell. He wonders - if he's right - just *where* he is. He doubts he's still in Dr. Lecter's office, but he can't imagine that he'd be so bold to take him to his home. It seems far too risky, especially for someone as careful as the Ripper. Perhaps Dr. Lecter owns another property - or several - and that's where he's keeping Will. He wonders if he's still in Baltimore at all, or if Dr. Lecter's crossed state lines to bring him where he is.

He hopes not - it will only make escaping that much harder if he has no idea where he is or where to go from here. Still, Will knows better than to hope he hasn't left the city. Odds are, he's probably somewhere far from prying eyes, and even farther from the FBI…

With a sigh, Will turns away and drags himself back to his bed. He struggles back over the railing and crawls under his blankets, the pad crinkling loudly as he settles into place, much to his disgust. He curls up on his side, keeping his back firmly to the door.

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." He mutters glumly to himself.

"Oh, come now, Will." Dr. Lecter's voice suddenly calls out, and Will jerks in surprise, turning just in time to see him slipping through the door. "You're being a little dramatic, don't you think? This is hardly hell."

"Isn't it?" Will sneers, watching as he moves across the room, a single bowl balanced on the bed tray in his hands.

"I wouldn't say so, no." Dr. Lecter says lightly, coming to a stop beside the bed. "But it could be, if that's what you prefer."

Will stiffens at these words, eyeing Dr. Lecter warily as he unlocks the railing and folds it down. “Are you hungry?” Dr. Lecter asks, and then, to Will’s horror, seats himself beside Will on the bed. “I have something I think you might enjoy.” He says, taking the bowl off the tray and holding it out for Will to see. “Steel-cut oats, cooked in a heavy cream and flavored with raspberries, vanilla, and coconut sugar.”

Will frowns, staring at the bowl. “You made me berries-and-cream oatmeal?”

Dr. Lecter blinks at that, his shoulders slumping slightly. He seems dismayed to hear his creation summarized so simply. “Yes.” He says after a moment’s hesitation, picking up the spoon that’s still sitting on the tray. He dips it in the oatmeal, stirs it up. Will watches as it turns tinted pink.

“Anything else you added?” He asks.

“A little protein powder.” Dr. Lecter tells him, “God knows you need it.”

Will glares at him. He’s being deliberately obtuse. “No sedatives this time?” He says, and he can’t help but be sarcastic.

Dr. Lecter smiles.

“Not this time.” He says, lifting up the spoon and blowing on it gently. “The only reason I included it last night was because I thought you might have trouble sleeping, but it’s morning now, so there’s no need. You *do* , however, need to eat, and I’m afraid that’s something I’m going to insist upon.” With that, he offers Will the spoon. “Open up.”

Will inclines his head, completely taken aback. “I-I can feed myself.” He mumbles, embarrassed. Not that he has any real intention to - he doesn’t trust that Dr. Lecter hasn’t added something to it.

“Considering you ate almost nothing yesterday, I’m not so sure you can.” Dr. Lecter tells him coolly as he lifts the spoon once more. “Come on, now, open up-”

Will turns away. Dr. Lecter frowns.

“Will. We’ve talked about this. You know what will happen if you don’t eat-”

“But I’m not hungry!” Will whines, even as his stomach growls.

“Clearly.” Dr. Lecter says, his tone flat. “Now, that’s enough stalling. Eat up.”

“No!” Will cries and turns his head when Dr. Lecter tries to feed him again.

“Will-”

“No! You’ve done something to it, I know it!”

“Will, I assure you, I haven’t done anything-”

“No, no, you’re lying!” Will insists, shaking his head, his eyes screwed tightly shut. “You’re lying, I know you are!”

“I’m not lying-”

“No, please don’t lie to me!” Will sobs, cringing away when Dr. Lecter reaches for him. “ *No* !”

Dr. Lecter cocks his head. He's quiet for a moment, watching as Will curls into a ball and sobs.

"Will," He says, his voice gentle. "Will, come now. *Will*. Will, look at me. Will-"

But Will doesn't answer him, or respond in any way. He just continues to cry, utterly terrified.

Dr. Lecter heaves a sigh. "You really aren't hungry?" He asks, in that same tone as before. Will hesitates, then shakes his head, peeking at him cautiously. Dr. Lecter smiles at him. "Well, then you wouldn't mind if *I* had some, would you?" He asks him. "I was so busy making your breakfast I didn't have a chance to enjoy mine. I'm absolutely *famished* ."

So saying, he then lifts the spoon to his own lips and slips it in his mouth.

"Mmm." He says, ignoring Will's wide-eyed stare. "Delicious. If I do say so myself." He finally looks at Will. Smiles at him encouragingly. "Would you like some?"

Will blinks up at him, confused. His cheeks are wet with tears. When Dr. Lecter presents him with another spoonful, Will shrinks back with a whimper.

"No?" Dr. Lecter says, and draws his hand away. "Oh, well. More for me."

Will watches as he swallows it down, his stomach growling loudly as he does. Dr. Lecter glances over at him.

"Are you sure you're not hungry, Will?" He asks him kindly. "Not even a little?"

Will swallows thickly in response, shifting slightly where he sits. Dr. Lecter dips the spoon into the oatmeal and pulls it out again. A jewel-bright raspberry sits among the oats.

“Why not just try a bite?” He says, holding it out for Will. “Hmm? You might like it.”

Will doesn’t pull away this time when he brings the metal up to brush against his lips. Slowly, hesitantly, he opens his mouth, avoiding Dr. Lecter’s eyes as he slides the spoon inside.

“Good boy.” Dr. Lecter murmurs, pulling it back out. He waits until Will swallows before he offers him another bite. “Would you like more?”

Will bites his lip, ashamed. After a few seconds pass, he nods.

Dr. Lecter smiles.

“Good.” He says, and then feeds Will another mouthful, and another. Will accepts them with only a small whimper of protest, and keeps his gaze fixed strictly on the wall when Dr. Lecter shushes him. Neither of them says a word until Will has eaten half the bowl.

“Do you imagine,” Dr. Lecter says as he lifts the spoon once more, “That there’s anything I find disturbing, Will?”

Will feels a faint prickle of fear at this.

It feels like a trap.

Still, he shakes his head.

“Well, you’re wrong.” Dr. Lecter tells him, his tone light as he scoops another bite of oatmeal in Will’s mouth. “There’s two things in this world I simply can’t abide: willful starvation, and the cold.” He pauses briefly, allowing Will a moment to consider what he’s said. Will glances

over at him, and Dr. Lecter gazes grimly back. “You won’t starve yourself so long as you’re within my care, Will. I won’t allow it.”

Will scoffs. “Your *care* .” He sneers. “Is that what you call it?”

“My dear, there’s nothing else I *could* call it.” Dr. Lecter says, rising to his feet. “That being said,” He says, “I will, unfortunately, be leaving you. A friend of mine has invited me to a private showing at her gallery, and I’ll be gone for most of the day. I’ll be back in a few hours, but I’ll be sure to leave you enough food to last you through the afternoon. I expect you to eat it, Will. If you do, if you eat everything I leave you - as well as your dinner - I promise you, you’ll be very happy that you did. If not, well…” He trails off, and levels Will a look. “I doubt you’ll like what happens next.” He cocks his head. “Are we clear?”

Will hesitates, then nods.

“Good.” Dr. Lecter says again before he takes the tray into his arms. “I’ll be back in a few minutes with your lunch, Will.” He says as he turns away. “In the meantime, try to behave yourself. Alright?”

Will doesn’t answer him this time. He just watches as he leaves, and it’s only once he’s swallowed up by darkness that he finally looks away.

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True to his word, Dr. Lecter returns a short time later with two bottles of water, an apple, a buttery croissant, and a thermos of yesterday’s soup, delightfully hot. He leaves them within easy reach for Will, who sits curled up on his bed. His tears have dried, leaving scratchy salt tracks on his cheeks, and he watches silently as Dr. Lecter arranges everything just so.

“Is there anything you need before I go?” Dr. Lecter asks as he straightens up at last. He’s changed his clothes for the occasion. The suit he wears is navy blue and sports the faintest paisley pattern. It’s tailored to such perfection that Will thinks it must be custom made. The bow tie at his throat is garnet red, and he smells of bergamot and rum...

It takes him a second to remember he's supposed to answer.

He shakes his head.

"Alright. I'll be back in a few hours. Remember our agreement, Will."

Will resists the urge to tell him that it's not an agreement, it's coercion, and instead sits there silent as he leaves.

For a long time he doesn't move. There's a part of him that thinks this is a test - he never did hear Dr. Lecter leave, and Will wonders if he's lurking somewhere, waiting to see just what Will will do when he thinks that he's alone.

The constant blinking of the camera light does absolutely nothing to convince him otherwise.

So Will sits, and waits. Occasionally, he sips his soup. Wonders idly if it'd be worth the risk to dump the rest into the toilet, and then decides it's not. Beyond that, though, he doesn't do much else.

It's hard to know how long he waits - he has no way to measure time. There are no clocks, no windows through which he might judge the position of the sun, and time seems both to run and drag for Will in alternating turns. He lays stretched across his bed, fingers at his pulse, counting heartbeats. It's an estimate at best. He keeps losing count, and the average heart rate is anywhere from sixty to a hundred beats per minute. Will has no idea what his is - he's never thought to measure it before. He's never had the need.

He wishes now he had.

His eyes flutter.

…He wonders just how many beats his heart has left before Dr. Lecter finally kills him…

It hits him then, this unwanted, awful thought, and has Will sitting bolt upright on his bed.

He's going to die here in this room, one way or another. He's never going to leave. Either Dr. Lecter will kill him, or leave him to wither away into nothing, or else disaster of some kind will entomb him here forever, but in any case, Will is sitting in his grave.

The room feels suddenly, distressingly, too small. The cuff around his ankle is unbearably too tight, and the air seems far too thin.

"H-Hey." He squeaks, unsure, and then again, louder, "Hey! Dr. Lecter? Dr. Lecter! Are you there? Can you hear me?! *Hey* !"

He scrambles from the bed, and staggers to the glass partition at the foot of his bed.

"Let me out!" He calls, pleading as he presses up against the glass. "Dr. Lecter, please, let me out! I promise I'll be good! Dr. Lecter!"

Will waits a moment, but there's no answer.

His blood runs cold. His pulse begins to race.

"Can anybody hear me?!" He screams, pounding his fists on the glass. Between his ribs, his heart pounds just as hard. "Hello?! Dr. Lecter?! Anyone?! *Hello* !"

He's screaming louder than he's ever screamed before. He hits the glass with closed fists and flat palms, and when that gets him nowhere, he slams himself against the panel with

everything he has. He can feel bruises bursting forth from underneath his skin, along the edges of his fists and shoulders, and yet the glass does not so much as tremble at his touch.

“Somebody help me! Please! Please, *anybody* ! Dr. Lecter?! Are you there?! *Somebody help me, please* !”

Will can feel his panic rising.

“ *CAN ANYBODY HEAR ME* ?! SOMEBODY *PLEASE* ANSWER ME!”

There’s no answer - only ringing silence.

Will chokes, and takes a single, stumbling step back from the glass.

With a sob, he collapses to the ground.

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Hours later, Will lies underneath his bed, curled up on his side, his chain connected to him like a grotesque umbilical cord.

He drifts...

The bruises on his shoulders throb. His throat is raw from screaming. The skin around his ankle isn’t that much better - Will has spent most of the afternoon clawing desperately at his cuff, trying to get it off.

The blood that cakes his shin has almost dried when Will hears the distant sound of footsteps.

“Will?” He hears a moment later, followed closely by the tapping of Italian leather against tile. Will stiffens, watching Dr. Lecter’s shoes move closer. “Will?”

Will holds his breath as Dr. Lecter’s feet come to a stop beside him.

His face appears a moment later, when he leans down to peer under the bed.

“Hello.” He says, his voice soft, as though he’s trying not to startle him. “What are you doing down there? Are you alright?”

Will doesn’t answer him. He just lies there frozen, eyes wide. Dr. Lecter cocks his head, studying him closely. When he sees his leg, he frowns.

“Did you hurt yourself?” He asks, reaching for him. Will cringes back, and Dr. Lecter immediately stops, his hand hovering a few inches from Will’s side. He waits a moment, and then slowly inches forward.

“Come here.” He says, his voice still soft as he draws him carefully out. “Shh. It’s alright. Here, let me see…Oh, Will…What happened, sweet boy?”

Will swallows thickly, too terrified to speak. Thankfully, Dr. Lecter doesn’t seem to be expecting a response.

“Wait here, Will.” He says, raising to his feet. “I’ll be right back.”

Will does as he says and remains where he is, while Dr. Lecter moves swiftly to the rolling cart across the room. Will cranes his head, trying to see what he’s doing. He seems to be rummaging through one of the drawers…

When he turns a moment later, Will can see he's holding something. He draws his bleeding leg in close.

"None of that now, Will." Dr. Lecter tuts, striding over to him once again. A roll of gauze, a tube of ointment, and alcohol swabs are laid beside Will on the floor. "Come on - let's get you cleaned up."

Will does not respond to him in any way. He just sits there silent and unmoving, completely unresisting on the tile as Dr. Lecter lifts his injured foot. He cradles it gently in his hands, examining the deep scratches that decorate his flesh.

He clicks his tongue at what he sees.

"You've really done a number on yourself, Will." He says, and from his pocket he removes a tiny key. "What's to be done about that?"

Will blinks, surprised, when he takes the key and slips it in the lock that holds his cuff in place. It's off a second later, but before Will has the chance to celebrate his new freedom, Dr. Lecter's moved it to his other ankle.

"There." Dr. Lecter says, once he's locked the cuff again, "Much better, now that the cuff's not in the way."

Will slumps a little, defeated, but Dr. Lecter ignores him. He picks up one of the alcohol pads and quickly tears it open.

"This is going to sting." He warns, before pressing the little square to one of the larger gashes. Will winces slightly, but doesn't pull away as he begins to clean the cut.

"Does it hurt?" Dr. Lecter asks him, sounding worried.

Will shakes his head.

“No.” He rasps, his voice wrecked.

Dr. Lecter’s eyes flicker up to his.

“How long did it take you to realize the basement is soundproofed?” He asks. He sounds amused. Will looks away with a scowl.

Longer than he’d care to admit, but Dr. Lecter doesn’t press him. The two of them fall silent as Dr. Lecter finishes cleaning Will’s wounds and smears them with a bit of ointment.

It’s only as he’s wrapping up the injury that Dr. Lecter finally speaks.

“Penny for your thoughts?” He asks, tying the gauze.

Will shrugs. “I was thinking about fairy tales.”

Dr. Lecter cocks an eyebrow at him. “About fair youths locked away in towers, guarded by the wickedest of monsters?” He says, smirking. “Yes, I’m sure that’s something you can relate to.”

“Actually,” Will answers, shooting him a withering glare. “I was thinking more along the lines of Hansel and Gretel.”

“Oh?”

Will shrugs again. “Innocent children left to fend for themselves deep in the woods, a trail of breadcrumbs that lead them to a little candied house. The helpful person that they meet isn’t what she seems, and once she’s gained their trust, locks them in a cage.” He heaves a sigh.

“Spends the next few days trying to fatten them up.” He mutters bitterly, glancing at the tray that Dr. Lecter’s brought.

Dr. Lecter looks like he’s trying not to laugh. “Yes, I admit, it’s very apropos.” He says before he pulls Will to his feet. “Much more than you realize.”

So saying, he helps Will into bed. It’s only then, as he’s straightening his blankets, that Will realizes he’s less polished than the last time that he saw him. His hair is mussed, and his bowtie is undone and draped around his neck. He looks tired.

Will cocks his head.

“How was your friend’s art show?” He asks, and is surprised to find he genuinely wants to know. Not because he’s interested in art - Will couldn’t care any less about that - but because he’s curious about the people Dr. Lecter chooses to associate with.

It’s a strange concept, the idea of the Ripper having friends. He wonders idly if Dr. Lecter thinks of them the same way other people do, or if ‘friend’ is simply a much easier term than ‘people I tolerate enough not to immediately mutilate to the point of death’. Psychopaths, he knows, are typically loners, but in this, Dr. Lecter appears to be the exception to the rule. In comparison he seems quite social, and if he’s willing to interact with people to the extent he does, he must enjoy it on some level. But even so, Will thinks it must be exhausting, having to constantly pretend to be something that you’re not, especially when you possess enough self-awareness to know not only that you’ll never be accepted for exactly what you are, but also understand why.

Will wonders if he ever gets lonely, even when he’s in a room full of people…

Dr. Lecter glances over at him. He seems surprised by Will’s question.

“It was a lovely afternoon,” He finally says as he finishes tucking Will in bed. “There were many Postmodernist pieces I had never seen before. I don’t know how she managed to procure them.” His lips twist slightly. “But if I’m being honest, I much prefer the works of Botticelli to those of Andy Warhol.”

“Really? You prefer angels and nymphs to cans of soup?” Will asks him teasingly.

Dr. Lecter looks at him, amused.

“Apparently.” Is all he says before he turns and reaches for the bed tray that he’s brought. “Loin,” He says as he begins to cut the meat into little, bite-sized pieces, “Served with a Cumberland sauce and fava beans.” He lifts a sliver to Will’s lips. “Enjoy.”

Will eats without complaint, allowing Dr. Lecter to feed him as if he can’t manage it himself. He has no idea if this meal is drugged, and he finds he doesn’t care.

It’s not as if it matters.

Dr. Lecter, in comparison, seems pleased with his newfound acquiescence.

“Very good, Will.” He says when Will has finally finished. “You’ve eaten everything I’ve brought you today. I believe that means I owe you a reward, doesn’t it?”

Will eyes him warily. “What is it?” He asks.

“Never ask.” Dr. Lecter says, smirking at him. “It spoils the surprise. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

Will sighs. “I’m not sure I can handle any more surprises from you, Dr. Lecter.” He murmurs.

“Please, Will,” Dr. Lecter says. “Call me Hannibal.”

“Alright.” Will agrees, too tired to argue. “Hannibal.”

Hannibal beams at him. “Goodnight, Will.”

“Goodnight.” Will mumbles, his eyes fluttering shut.

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The next morning, Will wakes up to see the ankle cuff is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: originally, I had planned to name each chapter title in reference to a fairy tale, but couldn't make it work for every one.

Thank you for reading!

Chapter 5

When Will wakes the next morning, he's shocked to see the ankle cuff is gone.

He frowns, hardly daring to believe it. For one brief moment, Will actually thinks he might be dreaming…

But no, there's no denying that it's real - when Will reaches down and brushes tentatively at his pale skin, goosebumps immediately appear at his touch. He shivers, studying himself, and hates the fact that he feels as if he's missing something, that he's almost gotten used to seeing the awful leather strap around his ankle.

Will shakes his head, and climbs shakily from his bed. He takes a few hesitant steps away, inching toward the center of the room as if he's half-expecting an invisible chain to yank him back, and when it doesn't, Will quickly scrambles over to the far wall, to the cabinet and rolling cart that have been so carefully kept outside his reach for the past few days.

He tries the cabinet first, and is surprised to find it's open. Less surprising (in hindsight) is what he finds inside - spare blankets, towels, and bedsheets are all meticulously arranged upon the shelves, along with a small stack of neatly folded hospital gowns that are identical to the one he's wearing.

Will's not sure what he was expecting, but it wasn't that. He can't help but feel a small stab of disappointment as he shuts the cabinet doors. He's much less enthusiastic when he then turns to try the rolling cart nearby.

The top drawer is locked.

Will tugs on it a couple times, as though to verify this fact, and then moves on to the second. It, too, is locked.

Will's disappointment turns quickly to frustration. He tries again, and when the drawer still refuses to budge, he sits back on his heels.

He doesn't understand. He doesn't remember seeing Dr. Lec- seeing *Hannibal* - unlocking it at any point yesterday, not even when he was retrieving the bandages for Will's leg. Perhaps he locked it last night after Will had fallen asleep?

Will resists the urge to kick the cart, and instead forces himself to check the third drawer down. He's expecting it to be locked like the others. What he's not expecting is for it to slide effortlessly open.

Will blinks, staring down into the drawer.

Inside is what looks like the ultimate prepper's first aid kit - bandaids, rolls of gauze, elastic bandages, butterfly closures, iodine, bottles of rubbing alcohol, cotton balls, boxes of alcohol pads, a pair of tweezers, surgical tape, packs of suture thread, and nitrile gloves are all spread before him, laid out in careful rows. Will studies the contents for a moment longer, but ultimately decides that there's nothing of any real use for him to take. He closes the drawer, and moves on to the next one.

The fourth drawer is very much a continuation of the the third - tubes of antibiotic ointment, cold packs, penlights, a thermometer, stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, and glucose monitor, as well as IV bags and tubing. No needles though, as far as Will can tell, and he can't help but find this strange. He wonders if they're in one of the first two drawers, along with any other sharp objects that Hannibal probably wouldn't want him to have...

Will frowns as he considers what this means, wondering just what Hannibal plans to *do* with all this, and why he thinks he needs it. Is it because he's worried Will will hurt himself at some point or because at some point Hannibal plans on hurting Will himself? Will closes the fourth drawer with a shudder, and pulls the last drawer open.

His stomach drops, and Will stares at it in horror.

It's completely filled with Chux pads, adult diapers, collection bags, and catheters.

What… *why* …?

He quickly slams it shut, wishing he had never looked inside as he slowly backs away.

“Find anything interesting?” A familiar voice suddenly calls, and Will jerks around to see Hannibal is standing in the door, a mere three feet away. He scrambles back, slamming forcefully into the wall behind him. He sits there panting with his back against the wall, his chest heaving as he stares fearfully at Hannibal.

Dr. Lecter cocks an eyebrow at him.

“No need to be nervous, Will.” He says, moving deeper into the room with the bed tray in his hands. “I assure you, if I didn’t want you to explore your room, I never would have removed the cuff. By all means, please continue to your heart’s content.”

Will watches him distrustfully as he sets the tray upon the bed.

He’s not sure he believes him.

Hannibal, however, seems completely unaware of this.

“Here we are, Will.” He says. He almost sounds distracted. “A Sacromonte omelet, served with salsa sauce and grilled clementines. There’s also tea with honey for your throat. Enjoy.”

“You’re not going to feed me?” Will asks him, and seriously - what kind of fucked up existence is he now living that not only does he have to ask that question, but that he’s actually, genuinely excited by the prospect of being told that he’s allowed to feed himself?

“No, not today.” Hannibal tells him. “Unfortunately, I’m running late for work, and won’t be able to join you for breakfast this morning. I’m trusting you,” He says, turning to fix Will with a stern stare, “To finish everything that’s on your plate, Will. If you don’t, I’ll have no choice but to put the cuff back on. Do you understand?”

Will quickly nods to show he does, and Hannibal’s expression softens slightly.

“Goodbye, Will.” He says before he moves away. He strides past Will, heading to the door. “I’ll be back to check on you at lunch. Try to behave yourself until then.”

Will scowls, watching without comment as Hannibal leaves the room, locking the door firmly behind him.

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The morning passes slowly, and Hannibal spends much of it distracted.

No matter how hard he tries, his thoughts keep turning inevitably to Will.

He’s intrigued by the young empath, and has been since the day he met him. It’s hard not to be - Hyper Empathetic Disorder is extremely rare, and even rarer than the diagnosis is finding someone with it who has their sanity intact, or even one approaching their late twenties still alive. Very little about the condition is known, besides the basics - an exceptional number of mirror neurons, anywhere between double to triple the average amount, and often to the point of infringing on the anterior insular cortex, resulting in a high degree of empathy. Those who have it often struggle with understanding and differentiating their own thoughts and feelings from those of others, and typically have trouble regulating their behavior, which can result in extreme emotional distress. Dissociation and catatonia are common, as well as extreme depression and anxiety, which often leads to suicide.

But Will is different from what literature suggests. While he does seem highly anxious (captivity aside), he also seems to function remarkably well, given his condition - the level of self-awareness that Will demonstrates is unusual to say the least. He seems, more-or-less, in control of his own thoughts and feelings, and the fact that he can separate himself from other

people's wants and needs, especially to the extent he's capable of, is nothing short of fascinating. Much more so than the various psychological neuroses of all his other patients, anyway. It's frustrating, having to sit and listen to their so-called grievances when he has a far more exciting toy waiting for him at home…

But just *how* he should play with this new toy, Hannibal really isn't sure. Because as impressive as Will is, despite the level of control he has already, Hannibal can tell it's not complete - there were several instances over the weekend where he noticed Will copying his expressions and mannerisms, and (as far as Hannibal could tell) completely unaware that he was even doing it. A slight tilt of his head to mirror Hnnibal's, a faint twist of his lips to match his smile, a twitch of his fingers to imitate a gesture he had made. What's more is that while Hannibal suspects Will already knows he doesn't have complete control, that he's aware of just how vulnerable he is to outside influence, he's not sure what to do about it and that scares him. It would certainly explain his aversion to eye contact, as well as his… demeanor.

The real question to all of this is what *Hannibal* should do about it - should he help Will fortify the walls he's spent so many years constructing on his own?

Or should he simply tear them down until Will has no defenses left at all?

What he would become in either case, he really doesn't know, but no doubt it would be beautiful…

It's an interesting dilemma, one that Hannibal finds himself considering as he sits unmoving at his desk, watching the live webcam feed of Will's room from his tablet.

He's hardly moved all morning, and has spent the past few hours curled up in the far corner of the cell, his knees drawn to his chest. Hannibal frowns, wondering if he's hurt himself again. The image is too grainy for him to make out any details, but he can't imagine that he has. Surely, he learned his lesson the first time and knows by now it won't accomplish anything.

Still, he'll need to check when he goes back home for lunch. When it comes to Will, Hannibal has found that he can never entirely predict what he will do, and that alone makes

him dangerous. He knows better than to make assumptions, or to underestimate him in any way.

With this in mind, Hannibal shuts off the tablet and goes to get his coat. He's all but buzzing with excitement at the thought of seeing Will again and wondering what he'll do with him when he arrives, but he's interrupted from his musings by a sudden, forceful knocking at his door.

Hannibal pauses, irritated. He can't imagine who that must be - he's already finished with his last patient for the morning, and his next one's not till two. Whoever's there, they're being unspeakably rude, showing up at his door without so much as an appointment or a phone call. Especially when Hannibal needs to be getting back to Will…

He grabs a scalpel from his desk as he walks past, and slips it up his sleeve just before he grabs the door handle and pulls it open.

What he finds waiting on the other side is a surprise to say the least.

"Agent Crawford." He says, stepping back. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Sorry for dropping in on you like this, Doctor." Jack says as he brushes past. "I understand you must be busy."

"Not at all." Hannibal says smoothly, closing the door behind him and adjusting the scalpel that's still hidden in his sleeve. "And even if I were, I would make time for a friend. Please, come in. Sit down."

Jack does not do as he suggests. He remains standing, pacing back and forth across the room. Hannibal watches him, amused.

"Is something wrong, Jack?" He asks, knowing damn well that there is and more than slightly eager to twist that knife as far as it will go.

“Not exactly. Well, I don’t know.” Jack says as he runs a hand, distracted, through his hair. “I don’t know, maybe.”

“What is it, Jack?” Hannibal asks, almost gently, as he sits down in his seat. “What’s happened?”

Jack bites his lip.

“It’s, uh…it’s Will.” He says at last. “He didn’t show up for class today. No one’s seen or heard from him since early Friday morning. And none of us can get a hold of him.”

“Have you spoken with his parents? His friends?” Hannibal asks, pitching his voice to just the right inflection of concern. “Perhaps they-”

“He doesn’t have any.” Jack tells him, almost impatiently, as if he expects for Hannibal to know this (which, granted, he does, but Jack doesn’t know that). “He doesn’t have anybody - the only thing he has is the Academy.”

“Well, perhaps the stress of the Academy finally got to him.” Hannibal points out. “He was under a lot of pressure, Jack, and the Ripper deal with Kade Prurnell probably wasn’t helping-”

“No. This isn’t like him.” Jack says, shaking his head as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “He wouldn’t quit. He wouldn’t just run off. Not when I-”

He stops suddenly. Watching him across the room, Hannibal sits very, very still.

“Not when you what, Jack?” He asks, his voice soft.

Jack heaves a sigh and turns reluctantly to look at Hannibal.

“The Ripper killed his final victim.” He says. “Early Friday morning.”

“Yes, I heard.” Hannibal tells him. “It’s all anyone can talk about.”

Jack nods slowly at that. “I brought Will to the scene so he could take a look. I thought he might…I thought he’d have a better chance of catching him if he could see first hand what he did. That he might notice something that we missed before.”

“And did he?”

“The victim was impaled with every tool in his workshop.” Jack explains. “And arranged to look like an old medical drawing called ‘The Wound Man’. Will was convinced that it was proof the Ripper was a surgeon. So I…”

He stops again, and Hannibal waits a moment before he speaks again.

“What did you do, Jack?”

Jack shakes his head. If Hannibal didn’t know better, he’d say that he looks guilty.

Fascinating.

“I have a list.” He confesses at last. “A list of every doctor every Ripper victim has ever come in contact with over the past twenty years. We had always suspected that he was a surgeon but, as head of the BAU, I could never use it - it would violate confidentiality laws.” He hesitates. “But as a trainee, Will could.”

Hannibal carefully adjusts his expression, staring at Jack with just the right mixture of horror, shock, and outrage.

“Jack, please tell me you did not send Will out after the Ripper *alone* .”

Jack whips around, glaring at him. “I sent him after *information* .” He growls, defensive. “I never expected Will to *find* him!”

“Well, apparently he did.”

“We don’t know that!”

“Well, what *do* you know?”

Jack’s shoulders slump.

He’s quiet for a moment.

“We know we got a call from the local PD just after three on Friday morning.” He says, his voice soft, defeated. “About a possible Ripper kill. I went out and saw the scene myself and then I picked Will up from his dorm at around four. We were there for a while. I dropped him back off at the dorm at about six. A couple of his classmates reported seeing him leaving the dorm and heading for the parking lot a little after seven. Security footage confirms it. Speed cameras show he took the I-95 north, but we lost him just outside of DC when he took the exit for Greenbelt. We think he took a backroad to try and avoid traffic because we couldn’t find him again after that. We know his cell phone pinged off a tower just outside of Baltimore at approximately nine-fifteen AM.” His eyes slip briefly shut. “And beyond that, we don't know anything. It’s like he’s just…gone.”

Hannibal considers this. He’s pleased - beyond Will’s cell phone placing him somewhere outside Baltimore, there’s nothing to connect his disappearance to Hannibal.

And yet that doesn't explain why Jack is here…

"I assume that some of the doctors on that list you give Will are practicing in Baltimore?" He asks.

Jack snorts. "Yeah, only about two dozen, give or take. You were actually on that list, if you can believe it."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "I was?" He asks, as if he doesn't know this already.

"Yeah. Apparently, you were the attending on duty at the ER where one of the victims was brought in for a hunting accident or something. This was several years ago, so you probably don't remember."

"Probably not, no." Hannibal says. "I saw so many people in the ER. Only the worst cases stand out."

Jack nods. He's looking at Hannibal with something close to desperation.

"Hannibal, Will didn't…he didn't stop by here to see you…did he?" He asks.

"To see me?" Hannibal asks, frowning. "Why would he?"

Jack looks away. "I just thought…well, I *hoped* …" He trails off, heaving a sigh. "Whatever you said to Will when I brought him here." He finally says. "It really seemed to help. I just wondered if…if maybe he found something and made a jump. If maybe he came to you for advice, trying to expand the profile the two of you had built."

Hannibal laces his fingers together and leans over his desk. Looks Jack in the eye. “I’m sorry, Jack.” He says. “But I have not helped Will with a profile since you brought him here on Thursday afternoon.”

Jack closes his eyes. He looks nothing short of pained.

“Hmm. I figured it was a stretch.” He says, shaking his head, and Hannibal can’t help but be amused by the fact that Will had said the exact same thing right before he took him. “Thank you for your time, Dr. Lecter. I appreciate it.”

“Of course, Jack.” Hannibal says graciously, rising to his feet. “I’m glad that I could help.”

The two of them are silent as Hannibal leads Jack to the door.

“What are you planning to do now?” He asks him. “About Will?”

“We’re treating him as a missing person.” Jack tells him, moving like a man condemned to die. “I’ve got my team looking into it.”

“It’s a shame you can’t use that list.” Hannibal says, biting back a grin. “It might be helpful in narrowing your search.”

Jack doesn’t answer him at first. “Dr. Lecter,” He finally says, sounding hesitant. “You’ve been practicing in Baltimore for quite some time now, haven’t you?”

“Over twenty years, yes.”

“That’s a long time. You must have gotten to know quite a few people within the surgical community since you started here.”

Hannibal shrugs. “Difficult to avoid - it’s a rather small circle.”

Jack nods. “Do you think…if I showed you the list,” He says hesitantly, “Would you tell me if any names stick out to you? Any one who may have had… *concerning* behavior or psychopathic tendencies?”

Hannibal cannot believe what he is hearing.

The Brothers Grimm were right - some men really are just born to good luck.

And it seems that Hannibal is one of them.

“Agent Crawford.” He says with a smile. “It would be my *honor* .”

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When Hannibal returns that afternoon for lunch, he seems positively giddy, beaming widely as he comes bounding in the room with the bed tray in his arms.

It puts Will immediately on edge.

“Hello, Will.” He says, his red eyes dancing with amusement. “How was your morning?”

Will eyes him suspiciously from the corner that he’s wedged in.

“...Fine.” He says, frowning at him.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Hannibal says cheerfully, bringing the tray over to Will’s bed. As he sets it down, he glances back at Will. “Come out from there - I have an osso buco for you that I think you’ll very much enjoy.”

Will hesitates, rising slowly to his feet. He keeps his eyes fixed firmly on Hannibal as he moves across the room and his frown only deepens the longer he studies him.

“I take it you’ve had a good day so far?” He asks with just the slightest hint of sarcasm to underlie his tone.

“It has been most excellent.” Hannibal tells him as he begins to cut Will’s meal. “Thank you for asking.”

Will waits, and Hannibal doesn’t offer anything else, he pushes.

“Did something happen when you were at work?”

“I suppose you could say that.” Hannibal says, sounding far too amused for Will’s liking. “Why do you ask?”

“You just seem like you’re in a really good mood.” Will says, and then, because he has a feeling that Hannibal spends most days in a good mood, he quickly amends. “More so than usual.”

Hannibal hums as he carefully finishes arranging Will’s plate. Will can’t tell if he’s stalling or just savoring the moment, and stands glaring at him when he finally turns around.

“I spoke with Uncle Jack today.” He says, and the words are so unexpected that Will can’t help but jerk sharply in surprise.

“You did?” He asks, heart leaping hopefully in his chest.

“Yes.” Hannibal tells him, his lip curling. “He was most distraught.”

“About what? What did he want to talk to you about?” Will demands, taking an eager step forward.

“Apparently his trainee has gone missing.” Hannibal tells him, almost airily. “No one’s seen him in a couple days.”

Will swallows down the swell of hope that’s growing wildly inside him. “Does he suspect you’re involved?” He asks, trying to keep his expression blank.

“Hardly.” Hannibal tells him. His smirk has now grown teeth. “Quite the opposite, in fact. He came to ask me for my help.”

“Your help?” Will echoes, perplexed.

“Yes. Apparently the last traceable signal from your cell phone came from a tower outside Baltimore on Friday morning. Jack was wondering if you had come to see me.”

“I take it you weren’t honest with him.” Will says with a scoff.

“On the contrary,” Hannibal tells him. “In my own way I always am.”

Will glares at him. “Was that all?” He asks, hope fading fast to bitter disappointment.

“Not quite.” Hannibal tells him, still dreadfully smug. “Jack also wanted me to look over a list of Baltimore surgeons that he had.”

Will's disappointment turns suddenly to horror.

"He showed you the list of Ripper suspects?" He breathes, refusing to believe that Jack would ever be so foolish or so desperate as to reveal details of an ongoing investigation to a civilian.

Hannibal's lying. He has to be -

"Oh, yes." Hannibal is quick to reassure him. "They are, after all, my colleagues. I've worked with them for many years, and know them very well. He wanted to know if I thought any of them might be capable of murder." He grins, a sharp contrast to Will's wide-eyed, open-mouthed dismay. "In fact, there was. An old friend of mine - a neurologist at Baltimore General who's well known for his rather… *unorthodox* views. I told Jack about a malpractice suit that was brought against him a few years ago, when Dr. Sutcliffe was more interested in the possible effects of a serious brain infection than he was in actually treating the patient." He cocks his head. "Jack's over there right now, hoping he'll agree to answer a few questions that he has. Which, he probably will - Dr. Sutcliffe is not involved in this in any way. I'm sure he feels he has nothing to hide, that this is all just a misunderstanding, easily explained. Not that Jack will feel the same way, of course. Far from it." He leans against the bed, smirking at Will, who stands across from him on shaking legs and trying not to fall apart.

"You know Jack, Will." Hannibal continues. "He's like a bulldog - once he has his teeth in something, he will not let it go. I've no doubt he'll spend weeks, or even months, investigating Donald Sutcliffe, trying to prove he is the Ripper. By the time he figures out he's not, whatever chance he has of finding you will be very, very small." His smirk he's wearing widens. "How unfortunate for you."

The moment that he says it, something in Will snaps.

He snarls, blind with rage and lunging for Hannibal, trying to get his throat. His fingers rake soft skin, and Will feels blood beneath his nails…

But Hannibal is bigger than he is, and stronger, and it's with ease he catches him, grabbing Will between his arms and shoving him roughly to the bed. Pressed face-first against the mattress, with Hannibal draped over him, behind him, Will thrashes wildly, utterly terrified.

“Shh, shh, shh.” Hannibal murmurs in his ear, breath hot against the back of Will’s neck. “Shh. Calm down.”

But Will ignores him, bucking and twisting frantically in his hold, trying to break free, his feet kicking uselessly against the ice cold tile. Bent over him, Hannibal sighs.

“Will, that’s enough. You’re going to hurt yourself.” He coos before reaching over and flipping Will’s gown up over his back, exposing his bare backside. Will stiffens the moment he feels the cool air brush his skin, and when Hannibal’s fingers press against his thigh, cupping him, he screams.

“No, no, *no* !” He sobs, clawing at the bedsheets. “Please, no!”

“Now, now.” Hannibal soothes, and Will yelps at the sudden pinch that follows. “It’s alright. You’re alright. Shh.”

Whatever Hannibal injects him with, it’s fast, seeping deep into the muscle before moving directly to his veins. Knowing it won’t do him any good to fight, Will instantly goes limp, sobbing hopelessly into his sheets.

“No!” He moans as Hannibal covers him back up again, looping an arm under Will’s knees and lifting him effortlessly up atop the bed. “No, no…”

“Hush.” Hannibal says as he rolls Will over, settling him comfortably on his side and rubbing gentle circles on his back. “It’s alright, Will. Just give that a moment.”

Will shakes his head, his eyes screwed tightly shut even as the rest of him begins to weaken, sobs gradually dying down to pitiful bleats as the drug continues to circulate inside him. Even his fear is beginning to fade - in its place, exhaustion washes over him, as warmly inviting as a bath. His eyelids flutter.

“That’s it, Will.” Hannibal encourages from somewhere just above him. “That’s it. Just close your eyes.”

Will sighs, too tired to resist, and lets the darkness take him.

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When Will wakes, he can tell that several hours have passed since the last time he was conscious. He’s still curled loosely on his side, tucked firmly beneath a small, soft mound of blankets, but his body feels stiff, as if it hasn’t moved in quite a while. He blinks to clear his vision, and after several uneventful moments pass, Will tries to push himself upright, only to collapse against his pillow with a groan, his head and stomach spinning violently.

“I would advise that you don’t push yourself.” A familiar voice says, and Will turns his head to see Hannibal in the chair beside his bed. He’s in his shirtsleeves, with the cuffs rolled neatly back. There’s a sketchbook in his hands. “You’ll get sick.”

The only reason Will doesn’t answer is because it sounds like too much effort. Instead, he merely groans.

Hannibal flips his sketchbook closed and rises to his feet. He leans over the railing of Will’s bed, peering down at him. Will blinks back at him and swallows down a whimper when he begins to stroke his hair.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about you today, Will.” He confesses after a moment. “And I’ve finally come to a decision about just what needs to be done with you.”

Will sobs. “No!” He rasps, begging, convinced that he’s about to die.

“ *Yes* .” Hannibal insists before he straightens up. “Shh. I’m going to try and help you, Will. I’m going to set you free. There’s no need to be frightened.”

So saying, he then reaches over to the rolling cart that's been pushed up by the bed. When he turns once more to Will, he's holding a syringe.

Will cowers back, pressing himself against the bed as Hannibal leans back over him.

"No, no, no!" He chants softly, sobbing as he weakly shakes his head. "No!"

"Shh." Hannibal says as he injects him for a second time. "You'll be alright, Will. I promise." He leans in close as Will's eyes roll back into his head.

"And I always keep my promises." Is the last thing that he hears.

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There's a light.

A bright light, tinged slightly blue.

It's flashing.

Swinging back and forth to the rhythm of a faintly ticking clock.

It reminds Will of the pendulum he sometimes sees when he recreates a crime scene in his head. He wonders if he's at one now.

There'a a voice nearby, a quiet murmur in his ear.

Will can’t make out exactly what it’s saying.

He tries to turn his head. He tries to turn away.

The light’s starting to bother him.

It’s giving him a headache.

Will thinks he might be shaking slightly.

There’s someone panting, gasping like they’re not getting any air.

It takes Will a moment to realize that it’s him.

“Is something wrong?” A voice says, echoing again and again in the surrounding darkness.

Is something wrong…Is something wrong…Is something wrong…

The clock continues ticking and the lights continue flashing.

He’s shaking harder than he was before.

The pain inside his head is only getting worse.

Will whimpers, clutching at the arms around him for balance.

“If you comprehend the darkness,” The voice quotes, no more than a whisper. “It seizes you. Silence and peace come over you if you begin to comprehend the darkness. Only he who does not comprehend the darkness fears the night.” Lips press against his ear. “ *Let go, Will.* ”

The pressure that’s been slowly building up behind his eyes suddenly explodes.

Then his entire body seizes up, and Will cries out in pain as the darkness that envelops him comes crashing down at last.

+++

Will’s aware that he’s moving before he’s aware of anything else. He can feel the air as it drags across his skin, caressing him. There’s the squeaking sound of rolling wheels beneath him, and the intermittent flash of lights passing overhead.

He slowly opens his eyes.

He’s lying on his bed. His bed with wheels, he remembers only then. The rails are up. Support beams and fluorescent lights above him. From the corner of his eye, Will can see Hannibal at his feet, pushing him back through the doorway of his cell.

He weakly turns his head. He moans, a soft noise of distress.

“Shh. It’s alright, Will. You’re alright.”

Will is most certainly *not* alright. His body feels heavy. His every muscle throbs. His head aches. He’s completely drenched in sweat. His gown is clinging to his chest and armpits. His hair is plastered to his head - it’s dragging in his eyes. There’s a dampness in between his legs

and underneath his bottom. He's cold. He's wet. He can barely hold his head up. There isn't any part of him that doesn't hurt.

His eyes slip shut as Hannibal wheels him slowly back in place. He wonders idly where they went.

"Wh…wha-"

"Shh." Hannibal says, cupping Will's face in his hand. "Don't try and talk, Will."

Will whines, and Hannibal's thumb begins to brush lightly back and forth against his cheek.

"You had a seizure." He says, his voice soft. Will's breath hitches fearfully at that, and Hannibal quickly shushes him again.

"You're alright. Everything's fine. I just need to get you cleaned up. Then you can go back to sleep."

"N-no!" Will says as Hannibal undoes his gown. Hannibal ignores him, and a moment later, Will lies naked underneath the harsh white glare of the fluorescents. He shivers, trying to turn onto his side.

"None of that now, Will." Hannibal scolds him gently as he begins to drag a warm, wet cloth across his chest. "Hold still."

He cleans him carefully in smooth, broad strokes, washing the sweat from his body. Will resents how good it feels, and the fact he's too exhausted to do much more than weakly bat his hands when Hannibal turns him on his side to get his back and rear. He's relieved when he lays him down again, and once he's settled on his back, he sighs.

It's not long before his thoughts begin to drift…

Then Hannibal's hand dips between his legs, and Will jerks violently awake.

"No! No, don't!" Will tries to grab his hands again, but his movements are still too slow and lurching, uncoordinated. "S-stop!"

"I'm almost done, Will." Hannibal tells him before he finally pulls away. "There. Much better."

So saying, he then slips his arm beneath the crook of Will's knees, lifting him like a child to pull the sodden pad from under him. When he slips a new one in its place a moment later, Will sobs. He doesn't think he's ever been more mortified than he is now.

"Shh." Hannibal says as he lowers him back down. The pad crinkles underneath his hips. "All done." He covers Will with a new gown. Pulls the blankets that are tangled at his feet up to his chin. Will hiccups as Hannibal lays his hand atop his chest, refusing to meet his eyes. "Go to sleep, Will." He whispers, as he begins to move his hand in gentle, soothing circles. "Go to sleep."

Will's more than happy to obey.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> So, this chapter was going to be longer, but I decided to break it up into two parts for the sake of my sanity.
>
> Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wakes with a headache - sharp and pounding and impossible to ignore, it drags him forcibly from sleep and into the harsh, bright lights of his cell. For a moment he can do little more than simply lay there, squinting at the lights above him and listening to the sound of gently clinking cutlery.

“Good morning, Will.” He hears, and Will’s eyes flick over to see Hannibal nearby, fussing with something on his bed tray. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

He slowly shakes his head. “No.” He rasps, his mouth dry, and raises a shaky hand to rub his eyes.

“I’m glad. Did you sleep well?” Hannibal asks as he sets the tray across his lap.

The smell is nauseating.

Will’s quiet for a moment, breathing deep and slow as he tries to gather himself and his thoughts. It’s difficult - the inside of his head feels as if it has been tightly packed with cotton.

“I…I had a weird dream.” He mumbles at last.

“Oh? What about?”

“Flashing lights.” Will says, eyes screwed tightly shut, trying to remember. The last thing he recalls with any sort of certainty or clarity is attacking Hannibal with his hands…everything after that is a blur. “I think…I think you were there.”

“Was I?” Hannibal asks. “What was I doing?”

Will frowns. “I don’t remember.” He says, voice no more than a whisper.

“Ah, well. Maybe it will come to you.” There’s a small pause, and though Will doesn’t dare to open his eyes, he can feel the weight of Hannibal’s on him. “Is something wrong, Will? You look like you’re in pain.”

Will hesitates. “My head hurts.” He eventually confesses.

“Your head hurts?”

“Everything hurts.” He amends, and it does. Every muscle feels sore, as if they’ve spent several hours locked and cramping. Will licks his chapped lips. “Can I have some aspirin?” He asks hesitantly, wondering if Hannibal will deny him simply for the fun of making him suffer.

“Of course, dear.” Hannibal tells him. “One moment.”

Will listens to the sound of his retreating footsteps, the jangling of keys. There’s the metallic scrape of a drawer being opened, and it’s not long after Will hears the rattling of pills being shaken from a bottle.

That must be what he's keeping in the first two drawers . Will decides as Hannibal's footsteps return to him. *Sharps and medicine. That's why they're locked. He probably doesn't want to risk me hurting myself.*

He feels Hannibal's fingers brush against his lips a moment later.

"Here, Will." He says. "Open your mouth."

Too tired to argue, too pained to argue, Will slowly parts his lips, and is rewarded with the familiar, slightly sour taste of acetylsalicylic acid on his tongue.

"Here, have some water-"

There's the rim of glass between his teeth, but before Hannibal can tip it, Will swallows the pill dry, purely out of spite.

Hannibal sighs. "You shouldn't do that, Will." He tells him. "It could damage your esophagus."

Will shrugs. "Force of habit." He mutters, trying not to think about a time he'd rather just forget, a time where pills were once shoved down his throat despite how hard he begged and cried…

He shifts slightly where he lays and flinches at the sudden flare of pain that follows. He can't help but groan, and when he does, Hannibal presses a hand to his forehead.

"Are you sure you're feeling alright, Will?" He asks, checking him for fever. "Perhaps you're coming down with something. Do you feel sick?"

"Just tired." Will mutters.

“Hmm.” Hannibal hums as he pulls away. “Why don’t you go back to sleep?” He suggests kindly a moment later. “We can try and eat again after you’ve had a nap.”

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” Will deflects, irritated.

“Not today.” Hannibal says, amused, as he moves away, mercifully taking the bed tray with him. “I need to keep an eye on you while you recover.”

“You don’t need to babysit me just because I have a migraine, Hannibal.”

“You can never be too careful, Will.” Hannibal says from across the room. Will cracks an eye and sees him standing in the door. “Is there anything else you need before I leave?”

Will chews his lip, reluctant to ask him for any more than he already has.

The pain wins out in the end.

“Can you turn off the lights?”

Hannibal smiles, and casually flicks the switch. Half the lights, the ones directly over Will, immediately go out. He sighs, relieved, and shuts his eyes.

“Sleep well, Will.” Hannibal tells him. “When you’re feeling better, look at the end of your bed - there’s a present waiting for you.”

Will pretends he doesn’t hear, that he’s already half-asleep. Instead he waits for Hannibal to lock the door behind him, and it’s only when he no longer hears his footsteps that he sits up, wincing as he does. He gropes around by his feet, and finds a bit of fabric nestled among his sheets. He picks it up, bringing it close, and realizes it’s a pair of cotton boxer briefs.

Will stares down at them, confused.

This…this feels like a reward.

But they can't be - Hannibal had said that he'd reward Will only if he cooperated. And that he'd punish him if he didn't. Will attacked him yesterday. He'd had to be sedated. He...

He…

There was something else. Something else had happened, something bad, he's sure of it. But what that was, he can't remember, no matter how hard he tries…

…So why would Hannibal…?

Will doesn't know, and he's too tired to care. He stiffly slips the boxers on, and drags them to his hips. He immediately feels warmer, safer, with them on, and he settles back, content, to curl up on his pillow.

He's asleep a moment later.

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Over the next few days, Will is gifted with a brand new pair of boxers every morning, along with several other things as well - thick socks, sweatpants that he wears beneath his gown, and a couple books to keep him occupied while Hannibal's at work. He eats without complaint or issue, and Hannibal rewards him with a sip of whiskey each night before bed. He indulges conversations Will would never dream of having with anyone. He doesn't shy from Will's sharp wit, or temperamental nature, or the darkness of his broken mind. In fact, it seems Will's wickedness delights him, and for the first time in a long time, Will doesn't feel the need to hide who - or rather *what* - he is. With Hannibal, Will becomes more and more

himself than he's ever allowed himself to be with anyone before, and as the days go by, he begins to slowly loosen in his presence. He stops thinking that he's going to die at any given moment, that Hannibal will finally snap and tear him limb from limb at just the slightest provocation.

The fear never truly leaves him though - he's haunted by recurrent dreams of flashing lights, and the knowledge of what Hannibal truly is, and it's precisely one week after he's been taken that Will remembers why.

He's lying stretched out on his bed, a copy of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (gifted just that morning) in hand, when Hannibal arrives, slipping silently into the room. He doesn't speak, he just stands there, watching Will, while Will pointedly ignores him, irked by his God-awful sense of humor.

"Will." Hannibal eventually says, and Will huffs, at him, annoyed.

"What?" He asks, refusing to look at him.

"Come here please." Hannibal commands, and though his tone is light enough, it has just the slightest edge to give Will pause. He glances over at Hannibal at last, and is surprised to find him without his jacket or his waistcoat, and that his sleeves are rolled up to his elbows.

He hesitates, his heartbeat quickening. "Why?" He asks, knowing he won't like what he's about to hear.

"I need to give you a bath."

Will blinks, convinced that he misheard. "W-what?"

"I need to give you a bath." Hannibal says again, his tone brooking no room for argument. "Come on, now - up."

Will stares at him in horror.

“I don’t want to.” He says, drawing back against the railing of his bed.

“That wasn’t a suggestion, Will.” Hannibal says, unmoving where he stands. “You need one. Now, come on, stand up. The faster you cooperate, the faster it will be over.”

“No, I don’t want to!”

“Don’t make me force you, Will.” Hannibal says calmly, his eyes narrowing. “I guarantee you won’t be happy if I do.”

Will swallows at the threat, his mouth dry. “Can’t…can’t I please just wash myself?” He asks, cowering as Hannibal comes closer. “Please?”

“Perhaps another time, if you behave.” Hannibal says, offering his hand to help Will up. When Will doesn’t take it, Hannibal frowns at him. “You’ve been so good all week long, Will.” He sighs. “I’d hate to have to take back all the things you’ve worked so hard to earn now.”

Will flinches violently at that, and slowly raises shaking hands so Hannibal can pull him to his feet. His legs tremble underneath him, and Hannibal has to hold him up as he strips him of his gown and pants and underwear, until Will stands bare before him. He’s trying not to panic as Hannibal leads him to the door, hands cupped protectively in front of him.

“One moment, Will.” Hannibal says, stopping him before they leave the room. Will watches as he takes the tie that’s draped around shoulders and holds it up for Will to see. “Before we leave, I need to cover your eyes.”

Will’s stomach lurches at these words.

“Why?” He whimpers, and tries to take a small, quick step away before Hannibal stops him. “Please don’t.” He begs as Hannibal lifts the silken fabric to his eyes. “Please, I’ll be good!”

“I’m sure you will.” Hannibal says smoothly as he ties the tie in place. “There. Is that too tight?”

Will shakes his head, tears spilling out from underneath the tie in shining, silver streams.

“Good.” Hannibal says, and a moment later, Will feels him lightly touch his waist. He flinches back, but Hannibal steadies him.

“I’m going to carry you now, Will.” He says, his tone gentle. “Get ready.”

And before Will can even protest, he’s swept swiftly off his feet into what is unmistakably a bridal carry. He squeals loudly, and blindly throws his arms around his captor’s neck, clinging to him tightly as he begins to move away.

“It’s alright, I’ve got you.” Hannibal murmurs to him quietly. “I’m not going to drop you, Will, I promise.”

“I don’t like this!” Will says between great gulps of air. “Please, Hannibal, I don’t like this! Just let me walk!”

“It’s easier if I just hold you, Will.” Hannibal says, and to his surprise, Will feels him gently kiss his head. “We’re almost there, don’t worry.”

Will buries his face in the crook of Hannibal’s neck as he carries him the rest of the way, nails digging desperately into his flesh for purchase - he clings to him because Will’s not entirely sure he’s about to have a bath and not something so much worse, nor is he convinced that Hannibal won’t drop him, either. Accidentally or on purpose.

It feels like forever before he hears the quiet groan of hinges, and a moment later, Hannibal is setting him carefully on his feet again. The air is warm and humid, and Will reaches for the tie, determined to rip it off, but Hannibal stops him.

“The blindfold stays on, Will.” He says firmly, grabbing his wrists. “Leave it be.”

“But,” Will sputters, squirming in his grasp. “But I need to see! How am I supposed to wash myself if I can’t see what I’m doing?!”

“I told you.” Hannibal says, and as he does, Will hears the sound of water gently lapping. “I’ll wash you. Now, come on, get in - the water’s getting cold.”

Will hesitates.

“Please don’t make me do this.” He begs, and Hannibal sighs. He releases Will from his iron hold, and takes his face between his hands.

“If you cooperate,” He says, “I promise you will not regret it.” He waits a moment, and then takes Will’s hands again, grip lighter than it was before. “This way.” He says, leading Will forward. “Step up.”

Will gasps when he feels warm water touch his toes, and can’t help but go completely rigid as Hannibal guides him slowly down into its depths. He panting again, gasping for breath, as the water swallows him up.

“Shh.” Hannibal whispers in his ear. “Relax. Nothing bad is going to happen, Will. You’ll see.” Will hears him settle just behind him. “Now lean back.” He says. “I’m going to wash your hair.”

Will stiffens even further as he helps him tilt his head, exposing his throat. He squeals again when Hannibal pours water on his head, and Hannibal cups a hand over his eyes, despite that he's already taking care to shield them with his tie.

"It's alright." He says, again and again as Will lies trembling in his arms. "Everything's alright - you're safe. It's just a bath, Will, that's all. No need to be scared."

His words don't reassure Will in the slightest, and he spends the next few agonizing minutes trying not to panic, convinced that any moment, Hannibal is going to force him underwater. Hold him there until he drowns. Will flinches every time he feels Hannibal brush unexpectedly against him, and has to stop himself from biting him at least half-a-dozen times. Hannibal, for his part, continues his litany of reassurances as he proceeds to wash Will's back and shoulders, lips pressed against his ear.

"Good boy." He says, hands dipping steadily lower and lower. "Good boy."

By the time he makes it to Will's groin, Will's all but hyperventilating, gripping the sides of the tub as hard as he can. Hannibal cleans him with clinical detachment, and Will sobs when he finally pulls away, slumping bonelessly against the tub, relieved.

"Almost done, Will." Hannibal encourages him. "Can you lift your feet for me? That's it…"

When he pronounces that he's clean at last, Will all but scrambles from the tub, warm water sloshing over the sides and onto the floor in his eagerness to get out-

His feet slip as he's climbing down, and Will cries out, afraid, but Hannibal is quick to catch him, yanking him against his chest.

"Shh." He soothes him, holding him tight as Will wails into his shirt. "Oh, Will. It's alright. Nothing happened. You're alright. Shh."

“I hate this!” Will all but shrieks, gripping him tight. “I wanna go back to my room - take me back to my room!”

“Alright.” Hannibal says, nuzzling him. “Calm down. Shh.”

He waits for Will’s sobs to gradually die down, stroking his wet curls as Will shivers, and presses even further to his solid warmth.

“We need to get you dry.” Hannibal murmurs after a moment. “Poor boy, you must be freezing.”

Will nods, and allows Hannibal to wrap him in a towel. He’s quiet as Hannibal lifts him once more in his arms, and rests his head against his shoulder as he’s carried from the room. When they reach his cell, Hannibal lays him gently on his bed, and removes the tie at last.

Will’s eyes feel sore and puffy as he gazes miserably at Hannibal, who smiles as he pushes his hair back from his face.

“Shh. It’s over now - you’re fine.” He tells him. “No need to cry.”

Will bites his lip, and closes his eyes as Hannibal leans down to kiss his forehead once again. Something flutters lightly in his stomach as he pulls away.

“Let’s get you dressed.” Hannibal says, turning toward the cabinet in the corner. “You’ll feel better once you are.”

Will doesn’t answer him. He merely lies there shivering beneath the harsh fluorescent lights. When Hannibal returns a moment later, he doesn’t move, or acknowledge him in any way.

“Here, Will.” Hannibal says, wrapping one broad hand around Will’s slender ankle before he lifts it up and threads it through his briefs. He helps Will raise his hips, and pulls the boxers

up until Will's covered properly. He does it again with the sweatpants, Will neither helping nor hindering his efforts as he slowly gets him dressed.

"Sit up." Hannibal says, and Will does as he asks.

"Arms up, dear."

Will raises both his arms above his head and stares sullenly at his lap.

He's expecting another scratchy gown, and is startled when instead he gets a shirt. He jerks up, and Hannibal takes advantage of his surprise by pulling the shirt over his head.

" *Much* better." He murmurs quietly as he adjusts the bunching fabric, smoothing it in place. He smirks, eyes soft, as Will runs shaking hands across his chest, feeling the soft cotton. "Do you like it?"

Will nods, too shy to meet his eyes.

"Good." Hannibal says before he turns aside. "I know that what I'm asking from you is difficult, Will." He says. "And that it's hard for you to understand, but please believe me when I say that everything I do is strictly for your benefit. And mine." He adds, almost as an afterthought as he begins to move away. "I must say I'm very eager to see what it is that you'll become when this is finally over."

Will frowns, not sure what he means by that.

Before he leaves, Hannibal looks back at him.

"The next time that you need a bath, I'll let you wash yourself - I think it's safe to say you've earned it."

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“I don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

“Doing what, Will?”

“ *This* .” Will says, with a languid wave of his hand. He’s lying in the tub, with his head cradled on its edge. The water’s been anointed with expensive oils. The smell is nothing short of intoxicating. “All this. What’s the point of keeping me alive?”

“I told you. I have use for you.” Hannibal says from across the room, where he sits with his legs crossed and his sketchbook balanced on his lap. In addition to allowing Will to bathe himself now (though strictly under his near-constant supervision), he also lets him bathe without the blindfold, though he insists it still be used when moving between rooms. “And besides.” He adds, dragging a finger across the page. “You’re not my prey of choice.”

Will blinks drowsily at that. He thinks he should probably be a lot more concerned by that statement than he is. “Who is?”

“Come now, Will.” Hannibal says, lips curled into a faint smirk. “You’ve seen my work. Surely, you must have some idea by now.”

Will frowns. Yes, he’s seen the Ripper’s work - first-hand, in fact - and yes, he thinks he might have some idea as to what exactly motivates him, but even for all his empathy allows, Will’s not sure he’ll ever understand him and all he does entirely.

“Your tableaus are public shamings.” He mutters at last. A part of him’s embarrassed to be offering his interpretation of the Ripper to the man himself, knowing that he might be wrong, but another part, a bigger part, is curious. “Your victims were pests you swatted.”

Hannibal's definitely smirking now. He doesn't answer Will, he just continues sketching, and Will takes that to mean he's right.

But even so, there's still something that he doesn't understand.

"But wasn't I a pest?" He asks. "It must have been annoying, getting caught. Having someone finally see you for who you really are."

Hannibal looks up at him, and pinned beneath his piercing gaze, Will can't help but feel a little breathless.

"No." Is all he says.

Will's brow furrows, more confused than ever when Hannibal turns back to his book. He huffs, his heart still fluttering in his chest.

"Fine, you don't think I'm a pest." He says, irritated by Hannibal's evasive answers. Hannibal had once said that in his own way, he's always honest, and perhaps he is, but Will's not interested in glib half-truths or twisted versions of it - he wants it all, in all it's cold and agonizing glory. "And that you think I might be useful to you somehow. But why go to all the trouble of keeping me awake when you don't have to? Wouldn't it be easier if you just kept me unconscious?"

"Yes."

"So then why don't you?" Will asks, impatient.

"Because," Hannibal says, closing the sketchbook and setting it aside. "The things that are the most worth having in this world are the hardest ones to get."

He stands up then, before Will can demand that he explain, and takes the towel that sits waiting on the vanity.

“I think it’s time you get out now, Will.” He says as he unfolds it. “You’ve been in there long enough. You’re starting to prune.”

Will sighs but does as he’s told, rising to his feet, perfumed water pouring off him. Hannibal’s seen him naked so many times now that it doesn’t bother him like it used to. He stands quietly as Hannibal wraps the towel around his frame and pats him gently dry.

“I’d like you to have dinner with me tonight, Will.” He says, his voice soft.

“I always have dinner with you.” Will points out, rolling his eyes, because this is the one of the things that Hannibal is especially insistent on.

“I’d like for you to help me cook.” Hannibal elaborates. “And eat beside me at my table.”

Will glances over at him, surprised, but Hannibal won’t meet his eyes. He hesitates, because he thinks this moment feels far more significant than it seems.

“Alright.” He finally agrees, because, really, what else is he supposed to say?

Hannibal smiles.

+++

Hannibal does not demand that Will be blindfolded when he leads him to the kitchen, which irks Will to no end because it makes him think that all the other times that Hannibal insisted that he was were not as necessary as he once believed. If anything, he’s now convinced it was little more than some sort of psychological manipulation, something to make him even more

emotionally dependent on Hannibal than he already was. He mutters irritably under his breath the entire way, much to Hannibal's amusement.

"Do you like to cook, Will?" He asks, keeping Will's arm firmly looped in his.

"No."

Hannibal chuckles. It's strange having someone in his life who actually finds his perpetually foul mood delightful.

"Any favorite meals?"

Will shrugs.

"Kraft Mac-N-Cheese." He says, taking great and perverse pleasure at the horrified look on Hannibal's face. "Peanut butter sandwiches. Catfish. Jambalaya."

"You're from the South?"

"Yes." Will says shortly, because his past is the one thing he never wants to discuss with anyone, least of all Hannibal.

Hannibal seems to pick up his reluctance like a shark that's sensing blood. Will swears he sees him stiffen from the corner of his eye.

"Oh?" He asks, his tone light. "I had no idea. You don't sound like it."

"Get me drunk enough, I will."

He can't help but be just slightly bitter - he's worked so hard to lose his accent, the one last thing that ties him to his past. It always feels like a betrayal whenever it slips through.

“Hmm. Tempting.” Hannibal says as they finally cross the threshold of the kitchen. “But perhaps another time. Tonight, I have something else in mind.”

He keeps a firm grasp on Will’s hand as he leads him past an enormous, stainless steel fridge to the island in the center of the room. The countertop is also stainless steel, along with several ovens that are built into the nearby wall.

The whole thing looks like it’s a morgue (because of course it does), and Will can’t help but shudder as he’s brought over to the counter and stationed by the stove.

“For tonight, I thought I’d make Foie de Veau Lyonnaise.” Hannibal tells him as he takes a large chef’s knife and holds it to the light. “Do you know what that is?”

“It’s liver, isn’t it?” Will asks him. He grew up in New Orleans, and speaks just enough of Cajun French to get a sense of what’s been said.

“Yes.” Hannibal says, looking pleased. “It’s something I enjoyed many times in my youth, while I was studying in Paris.”

“Feeling nostalgic, Hannibal?”

Hannibal cocks his head. “Yes, I suppose I am.” He says, opening one of the island drawers and pulling out a whetstone. He begins sharpening the blade in long, smooth strokes. Will watches, wary. “Any foods that you remember fondly from your childhood, Will?”

Will mumbles under his breath, distracted.

“I’m sorry?”

“Applesauce.” Will says, a little louder, his ears burning. “My dad used to get it for me whenever I was sick.” He bites his lip. “It was the only time he was ever really nice to me.”

Hannibal looks over at him, and for one awful moment, Will thinks he’s going to ask him what he means, but to his immense relief, he remains silent. Instead, he sets the whetstone aside. “Are you comfortable handling a knife, Will?” He suddenly asks, holding the chef’s knife out to Will.

Will starts, surprised. “You’re…you’re going to let me have a knife?” He asks, convinced that he’s misheard, and across the counter, Hannibal smirks.

“Of course.” He says, handing him the knife. “I don’t see any reason why I shouldn’t. Just be careful you don’t cut yourself, sweet boy - I’d hate to have to give you stitches.”

Will scowls, not only at his patronizing tone but also at the fact that even when he has a knife, Hannibal doesn’t consider him a threat. He turns away, and accepts the onions Hannibal holds out without looking at him.

“Cut them thin.” Hannibal instructs him before moving to the fridge. Will ignores him, and begins to chop the onions as roughly as he can. When Hannibal turns back from the fridge, a clear bag in his hands, and sees what Will is doing, he sighs.

“Will.”

“They’re hurting my eyes!” Will cries defensively, shrinking back.

Hannibal shakes his head. “I’ll cut the onions.” He says, almost kind, handing Will the vacuum-sealed bag he’s holding. “You take the liver.”

Will takes the bag, looking down at the strange, copper-colored lump inside. “I don’t think I’ve ever had liver before.”

“Many people have reservations about eating it.” Hannibal says, watching as Will cuts it free. “But I assure you, it’s delicious, if prepared right.”

“What kind is it?” Will asks, intrigued, as he turns it in his hands.

Hannibal does something strange with his mouth then. It looks as if he’s doing everything he can to swallow back a smirk. “It came from a pig.”

Will stops at that. “A pig?” He echoes, puzzled.

“Is there something wrong?”

“Pig livers have five lobes.” Will says hesitantly. He distinctly remembers this from his high school biology class, and the fetal pigs they had dissected.

“And?”

“This one only has four.”

Hannibal looks amused. “Is it really so hard to believe that I would have one of the lobes removed, Will?”

Will blinks at that, blushing furiously. “O-oh.”

Hannibal chuckles slightly. “No matter.” He says, with a small wave of his hand. “Dice the liver, Will.” He says, turning back to the onions. “As soon as you’re done, bring it here.”

Will does as he's told, and cuts the liver into bite-sized pieces while Hannibal finishes the onions, which he then transfers to a skillet. As they cook, Hannibal collects a handful of herbs and instructs Will to chop these as well before returning to the stove. He's about halfway done when Hannibal suddenly stops, and turns back to the fridge with a frown.

"Something wrong?" Will asks, watching as he riffles through its contents.

"Would you be opposed if I added sweetbreads to the dish, Will?" Hannibal asks him, taking out another small, vacuum-sealed bag. "I think it would pair well with what we're having."

"Sweetbreads?" Will asks, craning his neck as Hannibal moves back to the stove. "What's that?"

"Thymus." Hannibal explains, the moment that he says it, something finally clicks.

"He was choosy. " Will had said, looking at the Ripper's final victim. " *He took the liver, the thymus..."*

"What's he doing *with the organs?"* Jack had wondered, and at the time, Will hadn't known.

He does now.

The knife slips from his grasp and clatters to the floor. From the corner of his eye, Will sees Hannibal glance back at him and the knife that's now lying at his feet.

Will inhales a shaky breath.

Oh, God. Will thinks before he then whispers weakly to himself. "*He's eating them*."

Hannibal looks sharply up at him, and Will slowly turns to meet his gaze.

For a moment, neither of them move. Will doesn't think they even breathe.

And then Will bolts, scrambling quickly round the counter before he then goes sprinting from the room.

"Will!"

Will ignores him, gasping desperately for breath as he races down the dark and narrow hall.

He doesn't know where he's going. He doesn't know the layout of the house - he only knows how to get from the basement to the kitchen and only because Hannibal led him there only a few minutes earlier. He's panicking as he throws himself around a corner and finds himself hurtling down another hallway. Hannibal is right behind him, he can hear him, but Will is barely aware of this because in the distance, he sees sunlight splayed across the wall just up ahead, and he chases after it, throwing himself toward the light like a moth drawn to a flame, heart pounding in his chest.

He makes it just far enough to catch a glimpse of the front door, when Hannibal suddenly grabs him from behind, yanking him back. Will screams, thrashing wildly in his arms.

"No, no, no!" He cries, as Hannibal lifts him from the ground. " *NO* !"

He kicks out, clawing at the hands wrapped tight around his chest, trying to break his hold, but they only grip him tighter.

"Will, stop-"

"You're eating them!" Will screams at him, hysterical. " *You're eating them* !"

“Will, listen to me-”

“NO! *GET OFF ME!* ”

“Will, that’s enough. You need to breathe.” Hannibal murmurs in his ear. “Come on, Will - *breathe* .”

Will’s trying, he’s gasping for air even as he’s choking on it, but no matter how hard he tries, he just can’t seem to draw a breath. He can feel himself going limp. His vision’s getting dark around the edges-

“Will?” Hannibal is asking, and it sounds as if he’s a great distance away as he lowers them slowly to the ground. “Will, easy. *Easy* . Will, look at me. Will-”

-And then, Will finally faints.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I hope you liked it!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Not gonna lie, I'm a little nervous about this chapter. It's kind of...a lot.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a softness underneath him, and a pounding in his head, just behind his eyes.

Will groans, and keeps his eyes screwed tightly shut as he weakly turns his head, trying to remember where he is and how he got here…

He jumps when a cool, damp cloth is draped across his forehead.

“Shh.” A voice murmurs, before a hand then joins the cloth, holding it in place. “You’re alright. Shh.”

Will sighs, sinking back against the cushion underneath him, and when he does, a second hand takes his, the thumb brushing lightly back and forth across his knuckles. For a while he lays drifting, his thoughts hazy, undefined, enjoying the comfort of the washcloth as it soothes his aching head…

He’s on the verge of dozing off again when he suddenly remembers.

His eyes fly open with a gasp and he jerks back, trying to get away, but before he can get too far, a pair of hands grab hold of him and force him down, pinning him in place. Will looks slowly, fearfully up, and chokes when he sees that Hannibal is leaning over him, his expression grim.

“ *Slowly* , Will.” He tells Will, his voice deceptively soft and gentle despite the force with which he holds him. “Don’t push yourself before you’re ready - we wouldn’t want you fainting again, now would we?”

Will doesn’t answer him. He just lies there, trembling violently beneath him. Hannibal cocks his head.

“Would you like some water?” He asks as he reaches for a nearby glass. Will frantically shakes his head, eyes wide as he brings it to his lips. “No?” Hannibal coos, as if he is a toddler needing to be soothed. “Are you sure? I think it will help. Here, let’s just try a sip-”

Will turns his head away with a whimper, fists clenched tightly at his sides.

“Alright.” Hannibal says, and Will hears him set the glass aside. He flinches when Hannibal then brushes back against him, and begins to lightly stroke his hair.

“Shh.” He murmurs as he drags his fingers through Will’s curls. Beneath him, Will lies rigid, panting harshly through his nose. “Breathe, Will.” Hannibal tells him. “Breathe. I understand that you’re upset, but you need to try and calm down-”

“Calm down?!” Will cries, hysterical, as he turns to finally look at him. “ *Calm down* ?! You kill people! You *eat* people! You’ve been feeding me the very people I’ve been trying to save this whole time and you expect me to calm down?!”

“Yes.” Hannibal tells him with a frown. “In fact, I’m going to insist on it - calm down, Will, and if you can’t, I’ll have no choice but to help you.”

“You mean make me.” Will snaps, hating him. Hannibal merely lifts an eyebrow in response, and gazes at Will sternly, waiting. With a sigh, Will closes his eyes and forces himself to take several deep breaths.

“Alright, I’m calm.” He all but snarls after a few brief minutes pass. “Happy?”

“Exceptionally.” Hannibal informs him dryly. “Thank you for your cooperation, darling. Perhaps now we can converse like adults.” So saying, he then settles himself in the chair beside Will’s bed. “I’m sure that you have questions.” He says. “And while I’ll do my best to try and answer them, please understand that there are some I simply won’t. The first and foremost being ‘why’.” He looks at Will, his expression unnervingly blank. “I’m afraid you’ll have to find that out yourself.”

Will blinks. He can’t tell if it’s meant to be a threat or not…

He decides it doesn’t matter.

“Everything you’ve fed me,” He says hesitantly after a moment’s pause, “Was it all people?”

Hannibal looks amused.

“No, not everything.” He assures Will with a smirk. “If every meal I ate over the past twenty years consisted of human flesh, I doubt there’d be no one left in Baltimore at all.”

Will can’t help but shudder that.

“Are you going to keep feeding me your victims?” He then asks next, his voice no more than a whisper in the otherwise silent room. He’s dreading the answer, hoping against hope it won’t be the one that he’s expecting…

“Yes.” Hannibal tells him, and from the way he says it, Will already knows that this is something non-negotiable. “Though whether I do so forcibly or not is entirely up to you.”

Will inhales a shaky breath, trying not to cry. “Please don’t.” He begs, despite knowing it will do no good. “Please don’t do this to me. I’ll never ask you for anything else ever again, I

swear. Just please don't make me eat them."

"I told you, Will." Hannibal says, rising to his feet. "There's two things in this world I simply can't abide - starvation and the cold." He gazes coldly down at him. "You'll eat what I bring you, regardless of what - or *who* - it is. The choice of how is yours."

He turns then, and saunters to the door. "I understand you might not have much appetite right now." He calls over his shoulder. "I won't ask you try and eat just yet, but my compassion only goes so far. You have twenty-four hours to eat something, Will. If you refuse, then I'll be forced to intervene."

It's only once he's finally reached the door that he looks back at Will.

"Remember what I told you, Will." He says. "You'll be rewarded and rewarded *well* so long as you cooperate. If not, well…I'm sure you understand by now that I can make things very, *very* uncomfortable for you while you're here. And unfortunately for you, it's likely that you'll be here for a *very* long time."

With that, he turns away.

"Good night, Will." He says before slipping through the door. "Sweet dreams."

Will waits until he's disappeared from view, until he no longer hears his quiet footsteps, before he lays back on his bed and curls up tightly on his side.

It's only then that he allows himself to cry.

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The next morning, when Hannibal offers Will his breakfast, he doesn't seem the least surprised when he stubbornly declines.

“Are you sure, Will?” He asks, his tone mild, even as he takes the meal away. “You haven’t eaten anything since yesterday, and it will be a couple hours before I have the chance to bring you lunch. Why not just try a few bites?”

“No thank you, Hannibal.” Will says, his voice soft and his arms folded defensively over his chest. He shivers slightly, refusing to look at him. “Unfortunately, it seems I still don’t have my appetite.”

“Ah, well. I’m sure you’ll find it later.” Hannibal says. “One way or another.”

He turns to leave.

“I’ll see you at noon, Will.” He says, his threat still hanging heavy in the air. “If you get hungry before then, I’m afraid you’ll simply have to wait.”

It’s not long after that he leaves, and once he does, Will releases the breath he didn’t even realize he’d been holding. He settles back against his pillows, and lets his eyes slip shut-

His stomach rumbles loudly then, demanding to be fed.

Will heaves a sigh.

+++

Will refuses lunch the same way he refused his breakfast, and once again, Hannibal accepts his answer graciously. He takes away the plate of cut, cured ham (regular or long pig is anybody’s guess but Hannibal’s), smirking slightly when Will’s stomach growls.

“I’ll see you tonight, Will.” He says before he leaves. “Maybe you’ll feel like eating something then.”

“Don’t count on it.” Will mumbles from his bed, feeling slightly faint. He swallows thickly, and tells himself that he’ll be fine. That he can go a little longer. He has before - he grew up poor, dependent on unsteady paychecks and a dad who liked to drink. There were times when he was younger that Will went days without a single thing to eat.

He can do it again, if he has to - he can handle just one day. He can last for just a few more hours. It’s just a little longer…

He won’t give in…he won’t, *he won’t* , no matter what happens, he won’t give in to Hannibal…

+++

There’s a hand on his back, stroking back and forth between his shoulder blades. Will groans and turns his head, blinking heavily at Hannibal.

“Hi.” He mumbles, rubbing at his eyes.

“Hello, Will.” Hannibal says, his voice soft. He’s sitting on Will’s bed beside him, and keeps his hand pressed light against his back. Will’s not sure if the gesture is meant to be comforting or controlling. “Did you have a good sleep?”

Will shifts a little, trying to get comfortable, but before he has the chance to answer, his stomach interrupts him with a sudden, high-pitched whine of protest, begging for relief. Hannibal’s dark eyes flicker briefly down before returning to Will’s face.

“It’s been twenty-four hours since you learned the truth, Will.” He says, in that same gentle way as before. “And over a day since you last ate - more than enough time for you to decide. I’ll ask you one more time: are you going to eat for me? Or not?”

Will heaves a sigh, heart stuttering in his chest, and slowly shakes his head.

Hannibal gazes grimly back at him. “Then you know what happens next.”

Will nods, lip quivering. He watches quietly as Hannibal reaches for the rolling cart that’s been stationed by the bed.

“Just remember, Will.” Hannibal says, lifting the syringe that sits capped and waiting on the cart. “This was your choice, not mine.”

Will looks away as he brings the needle close and slips it in his arm. He barely feels a thing, but even so, he can’t quite stop the tears that come spilling down his face.

“Goodnight, good Will.” Hannibal says before he pulls the needle free. “I hope whatever nightmares might await you are not so bad as the reality that does.”

Will feels him brush against his cheek, and it’s with Herculean effort that he drags his eyelids open. He watches wearily as Hannibal lifts a tear-stained finger to his mouth, eyes slipping blissfully shut as he savors the taste.

“I doubt that anything can be so bad as that.” Is the last thing that he says before Will falls asleep.

+++

Will’s uncomfortable from the moment he wakes up.

He’s colder than he was before.

There’s something on his face, something pressed against his cheek, pulling at his skin. It itches.

There’s something in his nose, snaking down to the back of his throat. He swallows thickly, trying to clear it, but the whatever’s lodged inside his nose remains firmly where it is. Will then tries to raise a hand to grab it, but finds his wrists are pinned tight against his sides.

Will whimpers, suddenly afraid, and after a few tries, finally manages to open his eyes. He looks down, and Will sees that both his arms and legs have been restrained, and that his shirt and sweats have been replaced. He’s wearing another hospital gown, tied loosely at the sides, and underneath, there’s something bulky wrapped around his groin. It crinkles loudly when he moves, and it’s only then Will realizes that Hannibal has dressed him in a diaper.

“H-Hannibal?” He calls, torn between embarrassment and fear. “ *Hannibal* !”

Hannibal must have been waiting for him to wake up, because he appears a moment later, leaning over the rails on the side of Will’s bed.

“There you are, Will.” He says, peering down at him. “I was wondering when you’d wake up.” He reaches down, and gently runs his fingers through Will’s hair. “How are you feeling?”

“There’s something in my nose!” Will tells him, blinking rapidly and trying not to panic. “In my throat - I can’t get it out!”

“Shh. Calm down.” Hannibal coos at him, cupping his face. “It’s just the nasogastric tube. You’re alright - no need to get upset.”

“It hurts!” Will tells him, his eyes stinging.

“Yes, they can be a bit uncomfortable, but I assure you they hurt much worse going in.” Hannibal says as he continues to stroke Will’s hair. “I’ve spared you that, at least, but I’m afraid the tube stays where it is, Will. No matter how hard you cry.”

Will sobs at that.

“C-can you please release my hands?” He begs him, sniffing. “Please?”

Hannibal hums at him, as though considering. “No.”

Will feels his stomach lurch. “B-but *why* ?” He asks as Hannibal continues watching him serenely.

“Because I don’t trust you not to rip it out.”

“I won’t! I won’t!” Will cries, squirming weakly on the bed. The buckles on his cuffs rattle as he does. “I promise I won’t! Hannibal, *please* !”

“I’m sorry, Will.” Hannibal says before he pulls away, “But my answer is ‘no’. You made your decision, and now you must face the consequences of that decision. I’ll remove the tube and cuffs if you agree to eat, but until then, they remain.”

As he’s speaking, his watch begins to chirp.

“Ah, perfect timing!” Hannibal says cheerfully, raising his wrist to silence the alarm. “It seems you’re due for your next feeding, Will.” He says, turning toward the cart, where a surgical tray sits waiting.

Will cranes his head, but no matter how hard he tries, he can’t see what’s on top. His stomach flutters anxiously as Hannibal retrieves a pair of nitrile gloves from the box that’s sitting by the tray. He pulls them on with a snap, once his hands are covered, he then reaches for the

tray. There's the sound of paper tearing, and then he holds up a syringe, much bigger than the last.

Will chokes.

"W-what is that?" He whimpers fearfully, shrinking back as far as he can. "What are you doing?"

"It's alright, Will." Hannibal says, and brings it to Will's line of sight. "See? No needles. It won't hurt, I promise."

Will's quiet as he watches Hannibal fill the syringe with a thick, sand-colored liquid from a little bottle on the tray. Once he's done, he then takes the syringe and fits it to the port at the end of Will's feeding tube.

"Alright, Will. Here we go."

Will tenses as he depresses the plunger, expecting to feel pressure or discomfort of some kind as it passes through the tube and down his nose, but he doesn't feel a thing. The liquid travels easily, moving without issue from the port and down the tube before it disappears completely from Will's view the moment it finally reaches his nose. Will scrunches his nose, disgusted, and the scratchy feeling worsens.

"My cheek itches," He complains half-heartedly, knowing Hannibal won't give a damn.

"Does it? I'm sorry, dear, that's the tape. It's the only thing keeping the tube in place, so unfortunately, it needs to stay." Hannibal tells him. "Give it a few days - I'm sure you'll acclimate."

He finishes feeding Will the rest of the syringe, and once he does, he then flushes out the tube with water.

“There.” He says, disconnecting the syringe at last and setting it aside. “That wasn’t so bad.”

Will doesn’t answer. Instead, he gulps compulsively around the tube. He hates the feeling of it in his throat. It’s his instinct to swallow, to try and move it further down, despite knowing it won’t do a thing.

Above him, Hannibal checks his watch. “I need to leave for work now, Will.” He says. “Is there anything you need before I go?”

Will ignores him, scowling at the ceiling.

“No? Alright then, Will, I’ll be back again for lunch. Try to behave yourself until then.”

Will turns his head to glare at him, chest heaving up and down. Hannibal smiles back.

“Goodbye, Will.” He says. “I’ll see you soon. And remember-” He leans in close, and whispers in Will’s ear, “This can stop at any time. All you need to do is ask.”

+++

Will’s in agony by the time Hannibal returns, gasping desperately for breath.

“Will?” Hannibal asks, setting the bed tray aside and moving quickly to Will’s side. “Will, are you alright?”

“Hannibal!” Will pants, tears streaming down his face, “H-help!”

“What is it, Will? What’s wrong?”

“Let me up!” Will begs him. “Please, *please* , let me up!”

“You know I can’t do that, Will.” Hannibal says, stroking his curls. “Just tell me what’s wrong and I’ll help you.”

“B-bathroom!” Will tells him. “I need the bathroom! Please, let me up so I can go!”

“By all means, Will, go.” Hannibal says, sounding thoroughly unconcerned as turns back to the bed tray. “I don’t need to let you up for that.”

“Hannibal!” Will sobs, shaking his head. “Hannibal, *please* -”

“Are you thirsty, Will? You sound quite hoarse.” Hannibal asks, bringing him a glass of water with a straw. “You must be. You haven’t had anything to drink in days.” He holds the straw up to his lips. “You must be parched, poor boy.”

Will swallows thickly as he turns his head away.

“No? Are you sure? Why not just try a sip-”

“No!” Will shrieks, jerking uselessly at his restraints. “Let me up! NOW!”

“Of course, Will.” Hannibal says. “I’ll let you up-” Will’s heart leaps, “-just as soon as you have something to eat.”

Will’s heart plummets as he turns to grab the bed tray, draping it across his lap. He watches as Hannibal begins to cut whatever’s on the plate into a small and bite-sized piece, shaking his

head the entire time.

“No.” He says, as Hannibal scoops the morsel up. “No, Hannibal, please-”

“Eat, Will.” Hannibal commands, lifting the spoon to Will’s lips. Will can’t see what it is, but from the smell, he knows beyond a doubt that it’s some kind of meat. His stomach rolls, and Will is quick to press his lips together tight, breathing deeply through his nose.

Hannibal waits a moment longer. “No?” He asks, pulling it away. “More formula, then.” He says, before he then moves to the rolling cart. Will sobs as he prepares another syringe.

“Hannibal, please. Please, just let me up-”

“Here we are, Will.” Hannibal says as he slips the new syringe into the port. “Let’s get you fed.”

“Hannibal, *please* !” Will pleads tearfully, “I’m gonna have an accident-”

“If you do, I’ll change you.” Hannibal promises him coolly, pressing slowly on the plunger with his thumb. “For now, you need to eat.”

Will sobs, watching as the liquid rolls cheerfully down the tube before it disappears inside him. He can feel it when it settles in his stomach, a weight that’s neither warm nor comforting, but heavy and disturbing and unwanted.

He swears he feels it push against his bladder.

+++

The sun is bright.

It peeks out from behind the heavy clouds that dot the sky, a corona of light that bathes the world below in its gentle, golden glow.

It's been so long since he last saw the sun…

Will keeps his face turned slightly up, enjoying its warmth as he listens to the gentle babble of the stream around him. He sighs, inhaling the distinct, familiar smell of freshwater, before he turns to cast his line.

He watches as it sails above the stream, a wide arc that descends gracefully and gradually until it first skims the surface of the water and then slips soundlessly beneath it. Will adjusts his stance, planting his feet firmly in the rock-strewn silt beneath him, and waits.

His mind drifts…

He learned to string a fishing pole before he learned to tie his shoes. Some of his earliest memories are of sitting on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, watching his colorful bobbers float among the reeds.

This was back when Will was still considered 'normal' (if not a little sensitive). Back before his empathy disorder began to fully manifest itself. Back before his daddy started drinking and back before Will didn't have a mama who was *dead* , he just simply didn't have one…

Will sighs.

He misses those days, that simpler time of boatyards with dad. He'd give anything to have that back…

Something tugs the line, and the rod jerks in his hands. Will grabs it before it can slip from his grasp, and begins to reel it in. It's too overcast for him to see what lies beneath the surface of the water, but Will can tell it's big as he slowly drags it in. He's patient, and keeps the pressure steady despite how hard it fights.

He almost has it. He's almost pulled it in. There's something in the water -something dark- that will breach the surface any moment now-

"Will?"

Will blinks, and turns his head to see that Hannibal's beside him.

"Oh." He mutters, shoulders slumping slightly. "Hey."

Hannibal cocks his head. "Where were you just now, Will?" He asks him.

"Wading in the quiet of a stream." Will sighs. "Fishing."

Hannibal's lip curls into a small, fond smile. "You enjoy fishing?"

"Yeah." Will tells him, miserable. "I used to fish all the time, back when I was a kid."

"You're still a kid, Will." Hannibal points out. "Barely twenty-four years old."

"Yeah, well." Will shrugs. "I haven't had much chance since I was accepted at Quantico. Technically, we're not allowed to leave the campus. For our own safety, so I'm told."

He's quiet for a moment, bitter of the irony.

“You know there are streams you can fish in Shenandoah Park?” He says then. “I’ve never been, but it’s not far from here - only about two hours or so. I-” His voice falters, and Will has to swallow thickly before he speaks again. “I-I told myself I’d go. Once I graduated from the Academy. Or if I got kicked out.” He shrugs. “Figured it was as good a consolation prize as a reward.” He heaves another sigh. “Obviously, that’s not gonna happen now.”

“Never say never, Will.” Hannibal tells him. “Things can change at any time. Who knows? You may see your stream someday.” He allows Will a moment to consider his words before he then asks, “Are you hungry?”

Will huffs at him, impatient. “Not especially.”

“I take it you won’t eat, then.”

“No.”

“Alright, Will. I’ll get the formula ready. But first-” He slips a hand beneath Will’s gown and checks the padding in between his legs. Will looks away, trying not to think about the last time Hannibal was down there, when he’d finally broken down at lunch and wet himself. “Hmm. Dry. You know, you shouldn’t hold it if you have to go, Will. You’ll hurt yourself.”

“I’m fine, thank you.” Will says stiffly, refusing to look at him as Hannibal finally pulls away and turns back to the cart.

“If you say so, dear.” Hannibal says as he begins to mix the feed. “But I’ll warn you now, Will, that I won’t tolerate self-harm. If you refuse to void your bladder or your bowels, I’ll have no choice but to fit you with a catheter. And if I do, I promise it will hurt. I suggest that you think long and hard about just what your dignity is worth to you.”

So saying, he then returns once more to Will, and connects the freshly filled syringe to the port.

“Bon appetit, Will.”

+++

It’s not long before the days begin to blur together.

Everyday, it’s the same - wake up, breakfast, lunch, dinner, fall asleep. Between meals, when Hannibal’s at work, Will is left alone with nothing to do for hours on end but retreat deep into his mind or else just simply stare unblinking at the ceiling until the silence and the boredom become too great for him to stand. He’s relieved whenever Hannibal returns to him, he’s *relieved* to hear his voice, to feel his touch and look into his eyes, knowing that there’s someone looking back who sees him, someone else to validate that yes, he does, in fact, exist.

Will drinks the poison of his words, and thinks that they sustain him better than the sludge that Hannibal insists on feeding him. The daily stab of hunger that Will feels is nourished better by just the sight of Hannibal than whatever else he has to offer. Will aches for him, in those dark and lonely hours of the night, and the time between his visits.

It seems inevitable when Will’s thoughts turn more and more toward Hannibal with every passing day. Every moment he’s not there, Will thinks about the Ripper and everything the FBI has taught him, trying to understand...

Cannibalism is a pretty niche practice, even among the criminally insane. It isn’t something they’ve talked about extensively - Will’s professors were far more concerned with more everyday things like search and seizure guidelines - but it did come up from time to time, on rare occasions and often just in passing. Will can still remember the day Jack Crawford spoke to them about his early days with the BAU and the time he interviewed with Jeffrey Dahmer.

“In certain cultures, cannibalism is seen as the ultimate way of dominating an enemy,” he had boomed from behind the podium. “It’s an act of aggression, a celebration of victory in war. But among killers, the reasons are a little different. Those who practice it are often people with borderline and other personality disorders. People who suffered from extreme childhood abuse or a trauma of some kind, and have an intense fear of abandonment. The way that

Dahmer explained it to me, the way that Armin Meiwes explained it when he was caught, consuming their victims was a way of keeping them forever. These people *loved* their victims, or at least, they claimed they did, and for them this was as much a sexual act as it was anything else-"

Will's not convinced that this is true for Hannibal. He doesn't eat his victims out of love, to keep a part of them forever, and he certainly doesn't get off while he's doing it - he thinks his victims little more than pigs, and if Will had to guess, he'd guess that what Hannibal does has more to do with dominating than it does with satisfying something so banal as pleasure.

But why? Needs drive, after all, but what need Hannibal has in dominating perfect strangers, people who mean absolutely nothing to him, Will really isn't sure. He thinks perhaps there was abuse, or trauma of some kind at some point in his life, and imagines it must have been horrific. People like Hannibal (if there's ever been anyone like Hannibal before) don't just happen for no reason, after all - they're not born, they're *made* , and Will can't help but wonder just what awful thing made him. He doubts he'll ever truly know (hell, Hannibal said himself he wouldn't tell him), but even if he never does, Will still *wants* to understand the how and why of Hannibal, to try and understand who and what he is.

And luckily for him, he has a way.

Don't go too deep. A part of him says each time he finds himself trying to assume the Ripper's point of view. *Stray too far and you'll get lost. You won't be able to find your way back to yourself.*

Except Will's not so sure he isn't lost already. He's not even sure if there was ever such thing as 'himself' at all.

+++

He's not sure how long it takes, but it feels like both forever and hardly any time at all before Will starts to wonder what he can do to make Hannibal stay for just a little while longer…

“Do you really have to go?” He blurts one morning as Hannibal pulls the syringe free from the port, heart pounding at the thought of being left alone.

Hannibal seems surprised.

“Yes.” He says, glancing over him. “My patients are expecting me, Will. It would be rude to make them wait.”

Will must look especially distraught, because his expression slightly softens.

“It’s only a few hours, Will.” He tells him, almost kindly. “I’ll be back before you know it. Before you even realize that I’m gone.”

Will wants to tell him that he *will* notice, and that every moment without him will be agony, but instead, he merely nods and watches as he leaves. Later, when Hannibal returns, he speaks at length to Will about the Bay, the peaking taste of oysters and the ways they are prepared.

“Have you ever had oysters, Will?” He asks as he reaches for Will’s tube.

Will nods, miserable, longing for their salty taste.

“Hmm. Perhaps some day I’ll make some for you.” Hannibal muses, watching as Will’s lunch flows smoothly down the line.

“W-Will you read to me?” Will asks one night, when Hannibal begins to turn away. “Please?”

“Of course, Will.” Hannibal says, and takes the copy of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* from where it’s sat, unused, for the past so many days. He flips it open, and settles himself in the chair beside Will’s bed.

“Once upon a time, there lived a man and his wife, who long wished for a child…”

Will lies with fists clenched at his sides, and tells himself he will not beg for Hannibal to hold him, that he will not give in to his demands, that he is himself and no one else.

Still, he wonders, still, he longs, and so wades a little farther from himself.

“Wh-what is it?” He asks one evening when Hannibal offers him something more substantial than the formula he “eats”.

“I’m afraid that isn’t your concern, Will.” Hannibal says lightly, bringing a spoon of thick, brown broth to touch his lips. “Will you eat? Or not?”

Will turns away, and isn’t sure who he hates more - himself, or Hannibal.

Is there a difference ? A nasty, little part of him wonders late at night. *What are you but a living mirror? How long will it take before the two of you begin to blur?*

Who’s to say it hasn’t started? He wonders as he shuts his eyes.

+++

“What would happen?” Will mumbles, fingers picking at a loose thread on his sheets. “What would happen if I said ‘yes’?”

Hannibal looks down at him. “If you agreed to eat?”

Will's lip wobbles. "Y-yeah." He says. "Would you take the tube out if I did?"

Hannibal considers him. "If you ate one single meal? No. If you ate everything I brought you for an entire day? Then yes." He sets the syringe he's almost finished filling down and turns so that he's facing Will directly. "Why do you ask?"

Will swallows around the lump that's in his throat. "I'll do it." He breathes, his voice hitching.

Hannibal looks amused. "You'll eat?" He asks him.

Will nods, not trusting himself to speak. Hannibal smirks and reaches for the bed tray at Will's feet.

"We'll need to go slow." Hannibal tells him as he takes the bowl that's sitting on the tray. He stirs its contents idly before he then lifts the spoon up to his lips, blowing on it gently. "With the tube still in place, you can only have a little at a time."

He carefully lowers the spoon to Will's mouth.

"Open."

Will hesitates for just the briefest moment before he slowly parts his lips. Hannibal slips the spoon inside, and as he does, Will shuts his eyes.

"Swallow."

His throat is tight. It takes him a moment, but eventually, somehow, he manages. It's only then the tears he's fought so hard for so long come spilling out at last.

“Good boy.” Hannibal tells him.

+++

Hannibal removes Will’s feeding tube first thing the next day. He doesn’t sedate Will like he did when he first put it in, and while it doesn’t really *hurt* per say, the sensation is still anything but pleasant.

Will sputters and chokes the entire time.

“There we go.” Hannibal murmurs when it’s finally out. “That wasn’t so bad now, was it?”

Will’s only answer is a gag.

“Here, have some water.”

Will’s hands are shaking too much for him to hold the glass, so Hannibal has to hold it for him.

“Better?” He asks when he pulls the cup away. Will quickly nods, and then he tries to stand, but Hannibal grabs him before he has the chance.

“Slowly, Will.” He says sternly as he helps Will to his feet. “You’ve been in bed for days - your muscles will need some time to recover.”

“And whose fault is that?” Will croaks, clinging to him tightly.

“I would argue yours. I did warn you what would happen if you didn’t eat.” He takes a half step back away, watching closely as Will sways slightly on his feet, and when he’s satisfied

he won't topple over, he then reaches for the stack of clothes he has waiting on the bed. "Do you need help getting dressed?"

Will shakes his head.

"Alright. I'll be back with your breakfast in a few minutes, Will. If you need anything before I get back," He nods towards the far corner, at the constant blinking of the little camera. "Just ask."

He turns away, and it's just when he's about to leave that Will suddenly blurts out, "Something awful happened to you." He says before he can stop himself, and across the room, Hannibal goes very, very still. So eerily still that Will can't help but falter slightly. "D-didn't it?"

Hannibal remains silent and unmoving where he stands, and for one terrible moment, Will thinks he's finally crossed a line.

But then, without a word, Hannibal slowly turns and looks at him.

"Oh, Will." He smirks. "Nothing happened to me. *I happened* ."

Will watches as he turns and walks away, disappearing into the gloom beyond his cell. He doesn't speak until he hears the distant sound of the basement door opening and closing in quick succession.

"Bullshit." He mutters.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, see you soon!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is late - I had a really busy week and didn't have much time to work on it.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The flashing lights are back again.

Brighter than they were before.

They flicker on and off as they swing slowly back and forth.

On and off…

Back and forth…

Will shifts a little, squinting at the lights.

They hurt his eyes and head just as much as they did the first time that he saw them, and he tries to turn away, but something holds him down.

“Shh. Look, Will.” A voice whispers in his ear, breath hot against his skin. “See? *See* ?”

On and off…

Back and forth…

His headache’s getting worse...

He’s starting to shake...

“The strobe causes neurons to fire en masse.” The smoke-like voice is saying. A hand begins to stroke his hair, and it’s only then that Will realizes that someone’s holding him up, that his head is propped against their shoulder. “Like striking many piano keys at once.”

The voice echoes.

The lights flash.

Will pants and trembles violently.

“The dissonance might foster a change in your mind. You may find yourself thinking differently than you were before.”

On and off…

Back and forth…

Will grits his teeth.

He’s shaking even harder now.

It’s painful.

On and off…

Back and forth…

A strangled noise erupts from out of him.

The hands have moved from Will’s hair to clutch his shoulders.

“See? *See* ?”

His muscles seize-

He knows no more.

+++

“Why wouldn’t you fire your gun?”

“Why do you feel the need to eviscerate and eat people?” Will snaps, as he chops an onion violently in half.

He’s had a headache all day. The aspirin Hannibal gave him earlier isn’t really helping. Neither are his shit attempts at conversation.

“Because I enjoy it.” Hannibal answers smoothly, unbothered by Will’s temper. Across the kitchen, he’s busy slicing kidneys. “And because rudeness is *unspeakably* ugly to me.”

“And therefore must be brutalized?”

“Transformed.” Hannibal corrects. “Into something much more worthy. Or at the very least,” He says, nodding at the bits of kidney that are strewed across his cutting board. “To something useful.”

Will’s quiet, considering. “I’m rude to you.”

“Yes, you are.” Hannibal smirks, sounding fond.

“Does that mean you’re planning on transforming me?”

“Who’s to say I’m not already?” Hannibal asks, his tone playful. “You still haven’t answered my question, Will.”

Will huffs, knowing he won’t let it go. “I’ve never had the stomach for it.”

“Oh? Were you unaware that you’d be required to fire a gun when you joined the FBI, Will?”

“Jack told me that if I got through the Academy, he’d make sure I was assigned to the BAU with him.” Will tells him. “He said it’d be mostly academic, building profiles to catch killers and conducting research. He told me I might occasionally be expected to do field work but that it would always be under his direct supervision. He made it sound like I wouldn’t need to have a gun.”

“And that appealed to you? Neutering yourself? Being under Jack Crawford’s exclusive control? Being entirely dependent on him for your safety?”

“Yes, actually.”

“I find that hard to believe. Even little boys who dream of catching bad guys one day are excited at the thought of firing a gun. Yet you are an adult - though barely - and you act as though you are afraid of it.”

“What if I am?” Will snaps, defensive. “What do you care?”

“I just can’t help but wonder why. What do you think is going to happen if you do, Will? What exactly are you so afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid-”

“Oh, I think you are.”

“Look, I just don’t want to hurt anyone, okay?”

“Really?” Hannibal drawls. “Not even if they deserved it?”

“No one deserves that.” Will insists, shaking his head.

“‘Mercy to the guilty is cruelty to the innocent.’” Hannibal quotes. “Or do you disagree?”

“N-No-”

“You’d be hunting *killers* , Will. People who rape and torture and *murder* for no better reason than the simple fact that they enjoy it. You're telling me you really couldn’t stomach just the

thought of shooting them?"

"What do you want from me, Hannibal?" Will asks. His hands are shaking slightly. It's making it hard to dice the onion. "I don't like it. I don't know what else you want me to say."

"The truth, perhaps."

"What, you don't believe me? Is it so hard for you to believe that I don't like the thought of killing people?"

"'The lady doth protest too much, methinks'." Hannibal says, sounding wickedly delighted. He then leans across the counter, his dark eyes locked on Will.

Very reluctantly, Will lifts his head and meets his gaze.

Hannibal looks at him with something close to pity. "Do you really feel so bad because just the thought of killing feels so good?" He asks, his voice soft, gentle.

Will chokes at that, staring up at him. For a moment he can't speak, he can only stand there pinned helplessly beneath his gaze. He heaves a shaky breath, eyes blinking rapidly.

"I…I *like* the thought of killing them." He admits, his voice soft, barely a whisper of noise in the otherwise silent room.

"And that scares you?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Will nods.

Hannibal cocks his head. “Killing must feel good to God too. He does it all the time. And are we not created in His image?”

“Depends on who you ask.” Will says, still feeling slightly brittle.

Across from him, Hannibal hums. “God’s terrific.” He says. “He dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshippers last Wednesday night in Texas, while they sang a hymn.”

Will sniffs. “Did God feel good about that?” He asks. He can’t quite help but be sarcastic.

Hannibal considers him. “He felt powerful.”

The words hang heavy between them. Will shifts a little, uncomfortable with the intensity of Hannibal’s gaze, and begins to bounce his hand -

The knife that he’s forgotten he’s still holding is closer to his fingers than he realized.

The blade nicks his thumb, and Will cries out, more surprised than he is hurt as blood spatters on the counter.

Hannibal immediately grabs his hand and leads him to the sink.

“You’re alright.” He says, as he runs Will’s bleeding finger under the tap. “It’s just a scratch. You’re fine.”

Will winces as he then disinfects the little cut, but doesn’t try to pull away. Instead, he watches silently as Hannibal retrieves a Band-Aid and wraps it carefully around his finger.

“There.” Hannibal says when he’s finished. “All better.”

So saying, he then takes Will’s freshly bandaged finger and brings it to his lips.

Will’s heart flutters in his chest.

+++

Will can tell it’s very late (or very early) when he’s woken from a dreamless sleep, and for a moment lies unmoving in the dark, wondering just what woke him, when the lights beyond his room suddenly flick on.

Will sits up, suspicious.

In the past few weeks he’s been here, Will’s never once seen the space outside his room. Hannibal has always made a point of either leaving the rest of the basement lights off, or else covering Will’s eyes when moving him to the first floor. Until now, Will’s never actually seen just what lies outside the glass panels of his cell…

A lot of opaque, plastic tarps, it seems, all hanging from the ceiling beams like curtains.

It reminds Will of a slaughterhouse, and the effect has him immediately on edge. Will eyes the tarps as they sway back and forth beneath the vents, wondering what's happening, what they’re for, when a sudden, muffled *thump* yanks him roughly back to earth.

There’s a slight pause, during which Will holds his breath, and then there’s another small *thump* , followed by what sounds like quiet cursing. It takes a few more minutes of this before Will finally realizes that Hannibal is coming down the stairs, and that he’s dragging something with him.

Will pushes back his blankets and climbs over the railing and off his bed. He creeps silently closer to the glass panels, craning his head to try and see around the tarps.

It’s hard to know for sure what’s happening - there are so many tarps (none of which are clear) that Will can only get a sense of just what Hannibal is doing. He does appear to be struggling with something heavy, though, hauling it behind him as he moves toward what Will thinks is a table in the middle of the room. But just before he gets there, he stops.

He releases whatever it is he’s holding and straightens up to his full height. “What are you still doing up, Will?” He says. “Don’t you know it’s past your bedtime?”

Will feels his blood run cold. There’s no way that Hannibal can see him - the lights in his cell are off, and he hasn’t made a sound.

“Will.” Hannibal says, a little sterner than before, when Will doesn’t answer right away. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

“You woke me up.” Will whines, and takes a fumbling few steps back.

“Did I?” Hannibal says lightly. “Oh, I'm so sorry, darling. I didn’t mean to.” There’s a slight pause then. “I think it’s time that you went back to bed, young man - it’s very late, and no doubt you’re very tired.”

“But I-”

“I’ll wait.”

Will hesitates for just a moment longer and then slinks off back to bed. It’s only once he’s settled underneath his blankets that Hannibal calls out to him again.

“Goodnight, Will.”

Will swallows thickly. “Night.” He says, voice wavering slightly as he curls up on his side.

He doesn’t move. He doesn’t make a sound. He just lies there in the dark, watching silently as Hannibal begins to move about again behind the tarps. Will still can’t see him clearly, he’s still not sure just what he’s doing, but it seems he takes whatever he’s been dragging and hauls it on the table, beside which he spends several minutes before he turns and slips back up the stairs. Will can’t help but jump a moment later, when Hannibal turns the lights off and he’s plunged once more in darkness.

Will lies completely still, listening to the sound of his own breathing and trying to stay calm, and not think about whatever he just saw…

He doesn’t sleep for the rest of the night.

+++

Hannibal doesn’t speak about what happened the next day at breakfast, nor does Will ask him for an explanation. Instead, Will waits until he leaves, and then spends the remainder of his morning pressed against the glass panels of his room, squinting through the gloom. But no matter where he stands or just how hard he cranes his head, Will still can’t see a thing.

He huffs, and drags himself back to his bed. He has no idea what Hannibal was doing last night (though there’s a part of him that’s not entirely convinced he didn’t bring back a corpse), but Will knows it probably doesn’t matter - Hannibal will either tell him or he won’t, and Will will have no say in whatever he decides.

He doesn’t expect Hannibal to say anything about it at lunch, and he’s not disappointed - Hannibal brings Will his food like always and then spends the remainder of their time discussing William Blake at length.

“Among his works, ‘Songs of Innocence and of Experience’ are perhaps his best known.” His eyes are distant as he speaks, and Will wonders where he is and what he sees. “The two are a collection of poems, each exploring various themes of the two contrasting states. ‘Innocence’ discusses such things as purity, joy, and simplicity, while ‘Experience’ discusses the darker

side of human nature, things like loss of innocence, suffering, and corruption. Perhaps the most famous of these poems is ‘The Tyger’.”

He leans back a little in his chair.

“‘Tyger, tyger, burning bright’,” He recites as he begins to rock gently back and forth, “‘In the forests of the night, what immortal hand or eye, could frame thy fearful symmetry?’” He’s quiet for a moment, and there’s something in the silence that almost feels like reverence. “In contrast, its companion piece, ‘The Lamb’, is considered one of the greatest pieces of English Literature: ‘Little lamb who made thee, dost thou know who made thee?’”

He looks at Will. “I wonder which are you?”

Will smiles at him wryly from his bed. “Personally, I see myself more in ‘On Another’s Sorrow’ than in either of those.” He says. “‘Can I see another’s woe, and not be in sorrow too? Can I see another’s grief, and not seek for kind relief?’”

Hannibal smiles slightly. “Yes, it’s very apropos.” He agrees.

“What about you?” Will asks as he stabs a piece of (so-called) steak. “Which one describes you best? ‘The Tyger’?”

Hannibal considers him for a long moment before he finally speaks.

“‘Never seek to tell thy love,’” He finally says. “‘Love that never told can be, for the gentle wind does move, silently invisibly.’”

Will frowns at that, confused.

Across from where he sits, Hannibal’s smile seems something close to sad. “Goodbye, Will.” He says before rising to his feet. “Enjoy your lunch. I’ll be back again at dinner.”

+++

When Hannibal returns, his jacket and waistcoat are gone.

“Hello, Will.” He says as he comes striding through the door.

Will looks over from where he’s stretched out on his bed. “Hello, Dr. Lecter.” He says, because he knows that it will irritate him.

Hannibal ignores him.

“I need you to help me with dinner tonight.” He says, and there’s something in his tone that Will immediately dislikes.

“Okay.” He agrees hesitantly as he sets his book aside.

Hannibal holds out his hand. “Come with me, Will.”

Will swallows his growing alarm. He takes his hand without a word and allows Hannibal to lead him from his room, watching him carefully the entire time.

They’ve barely taken two steps from the door when Hannibal suddenly stops him.

“What are-”

But before Will can even finish asking him what’s happening, he feels Hannibal reach past him, his arm brushing his. A moment later, the rest of the basement lights come on, and Will

squints in the sudden brightness of the room.

"Here, Will." Hannibal says, his voice soft as he slowly pulls him through the tarps, leading him toward the table that Will saw the night before. Will follows after him with his heart in his throat, wondering just what Hannibal is planning, and it's right as he's about to truly panic that he pushes back the final tarp. Will blinks at what he sees.

Strapped down to a stainless steel operating in front of him, is a man. A man with an IV in his arm and duct tape on his mouth.

A man in a policeman's uniform…

Will jerks away.

"What the-!"

"This is Officer Norman Allers, Will." Hannibal tells Will brightly as he moves around the table. "He's a sergeant with the Baltimore PD and a former patient of mine." He says as he picks up a syringe from a nearby surgical tray.

Will whips around. "He's a *patient* ?"

"Former." Hannibal repeats, flicking the syringe. "And not entirely of his own volition."

Will cocks his head. "What do you mean?" He asks, intrigued despite himself.

"Officer Allers was ordered to attend court-mandated therapy with me after brutally assaulting a suspect." Hannibal explains as he slips the syringe into Allers IV port. "During our time together, he expressed some rather unsavory views of women and racial minorities. Among other things." He depresses the plunger. "He also admitted to abusing lower-ranking

officers, and forcing prostitutes to service him under threat of arrest as well as using excessive force on underage offenders."

Will scoffs. "Don't tell me this is your way of saying you're some sort of vigilante."

"Hardly." Hannibal smirks. "I'm doing it because I was offended by him. He made several disparaging remarks regarding my citizenship. Apparently, he did not believe an immigrant was qualified to treat him."

"So why tell me the rest, if it doesn't bother you?"

"Because I thought that it might bother you." Hannibal says, looking up at him at last.

"What do you mean?"

"This is our dinner, Will." Hannibal tells him, nodding down at Allers, who's already beginning to fidget weakly on the table. "And you're gonna be the one to prepare him."

Will feels his blood run cold.

"No." He says, taking a quick step back.

Hannibal cocks an eyebrow at him. "No?"

"No." Will echoes, a little firmer than before. "I won't do it."

Hannibal studies him with narrowed eyes. "Will, this man abuses the power he's been given to prey upon the very people he's sworn to protect. He represents everything that's wrong

with modern law enforcement and the thing you fear yourself becoming." Beneath him, Allers' eyes have fluttered slightly open.

"I'm not afraid of becoming a dirty cop." Will snaps.

"Just that you'll enjoy the violence of the job the same way he enjoys the power."

"And therefore, he must die?" Will asks, watching him.

"I think it's better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

"Allowing such corruption to continue. Especially when you have the chance to put a stop to it yourself."

"Whether he deserves to die isn't something for me to decide." Will says, as Allers' hazy eyes begin to blink, squinting at the lights. He wonders idly if this was the same table he was strapped to when Hannibal first brought him here.

"Then what would you do? If given the chance?"

"If I was still FBI, I could have done something about it. The right way. I could have launched an investigation and brought the whole department down." The words taste bitter on his tongue. "It's because of you I'll never have that chance."

"There are faster and more permanent solutions, Will."

"I said no!"

Hannibal cocks his head at him. Beneath him, Allers weakly moans. “I know you want to, Will.”

“I don’t!” Will cries. “Stop it, Hannibal!”

“You do.” Hannibal says, more firmly than before. “You want it more than anything. That’s why you’re fighting me as strongly as you are.” So saying, he then offers Will his hand. “Why not just give in? You’ve been fighting so hard with yourself for so long, Will. Surely, you must be exhausted.”

He isn’t wrong - Will is exhausted. There’s a part of him that wants nothing more than to just surrender to the darkness that’s inside him, to just give in and feed the violence that he craves…

Will very nearly takes his hand.

Instead, he steps back. “No. You kill him if you want to.” He says, “I won’t try and stop you. But I won’t be a part of it.”

Hannibal’s frown deepens, but before he can answer Will, Allers begins to grunt behind the tape, wiggling more forcefully than he was before.

“Ah, Officer Allers!” Hannibal says, looking down at him. “I’m so glad that you could finally join us! You’re just in time for dinner!”

Whatever Allers answer is is lost behind his gag, but from the way he’s looking up at Hannibal, Will can tell that he remembers him.

“I’ve been meaning to have you for quite some time.” Hannibal continues, taking what appears to be an ice pick from the tray. “I’ve just been so busy as of late, I’m afraid I haven’t

had the chance to track you down."

Allers roars beneath the tape, straining at his bonds. Will watches, unimpressed.

"This is my good friend and protégé, Will Graham." Hannibal continues as serene as ever, and Will can't help but roll his eyes at his ridiculous choice of words. "He's going to be joining us tonight. I don't believe you've met."

"You know we haven't." Will mutters, and frowns when Officer Allers' head whips back, staring up at him with wide eyes.

"Whh Gwm?!" He says, words muffled by the tape, and Will's frown deepens, trying to convince himself that he misheard, that whatever he just said was *not* his name, but something else…

"Hmm. It would seem he does know you after all." Hannibal observes, twirling the ice pick between his fingers, and Will looks sharply up at him.

"What do you mean?"

Hannibal shrugs. "Jack told me they were treating you as a missing person. And your last known whereabouts was Baltimore. My guess is that the FBI has already spoken to local authorities about you, and probably have your picture on every precinct bulletin board in town."

Allers is still staring up at Will like he can't believe what he is seeing when Hannibal moves a little closer to him.

"How ironic that your face is the last thing that he'll ever see."

It’s the only warning that he gives before he then drives the ice pick through Norman Allers’ eye.

+++

Will barely says a word the entire time that they’re preparing dinner. It’s only as they’re sitting down that he finally trusts himself to speak.

“What are you going to do to me?” He asks quietly, watching Hannibal as he pours his glass of wine.

“‘Do to you’?” Hannibal echoes, sounding confused.

“As punishment.” Will clarifies, swallowing thickly. “For not killing Allers like you wanted.”

Hannibal cocks his head at him. “While I admit I’m disappointed,” he says as he moves around the table to take his seat. “I would much prefer you killed because you wanted to, and not because I made you.”

“Except I don’t want to kill anyone.” Will snaps at him.

“Oh, I think you do.” Hannibal says lightly, raising his own glass and swirling it beneath his nose. “And I think you know it too. That’s why you’re so terrified of firing your gun - you’re afraid you’ll like it far too much for comfort.”

“That’s not-”

“You might be able to lie to yourself and everyone around you, Will.” Hannibal interrupts. “But not me. I knew exactly what you were the moment that I met you. I saw the darkness that’s inside you.”

“Then you know why I can’t trust myself.”

“I understand why you think that. Which is why every moment *since* I’ve met you, I’ve done everything I can to try and bring that darkness out.”

“Why?” Will asks him, absolutely miserable.

“Because it’s not healthy what you’re doing, Will.” Hannibal says firmly. “You’re not helping anything by denying what you really are, dear boy - in fact, the only person that you’re killing is yourself.”

“I think most people would agree that killing myself is much better than killing someone else.”

“I am not most people.”

“And don’t we all know it.” Will mutters as he sips his wine. Across from him, Hannibal seems amused.

“Mark my words, Will.” He says, turning his attention to his plate. “I will get you to kill eventually. It’s only a matter of finding the right person.”

Will’s mouth goes dry at this.

“Now, please.” Hannibal says, gesturing to his plate, where one of Normam Allers two lungs sits cooked and slightly smoking. “Enjoy.”

Will sighs and grabs his fork and knife. He jumps when, upon piercing the soft flesh, and a loud and high-pitched whistle follows. He glances up at Hannibal, who smirks.

“Sibilo caratteristico". He explains, winking at him. “When the lungs whistle, the dish is done.”

Will huffs, biting back a laugh. “Is that supposed to be some sort of reference to police whistles?”

Hannibal shrugs, his dark eyes dancing with amusement. “Perhaps.”

Will snorts and shakes his head, amused despite himself. “You know what we call dirty cops?” He asks a moment later.

Hannibal looks up at him, his eyebrows raised in question.

Will grins. “Pigs.”

Hannibal blinks, surprised, and then grins back at him.

+++

After dinner is eaten and the dishes are cleaned and put away, Hannibal takes Will back downstairs. He’s silent as he leads Will to his room and offers him the slightest smile as he holds the door open for him.

Will’s not sure why he does it, but once he passes Hannibal and steps into his room, he stops and slowly turns to meet his eyes.

“Goodnight, Hannibal.” He says, his voice a whisper in the dark, and in answer, Hannibal holds out his hand. Hesitantly, Will takes it, and when he does, Hannibal then lifts his hand up to his lips.

“Goodnight, Will.” He murmurs before pressing a soft kiss against his knuckles.

Will can’t help but shiver at his touch.

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The lights are flashing.

There’s someone standing over him.

“You’re waking now...”

Will can’t see his face.

“Waking.”

The lights hurt.

“Calm.”

Will tries to turn his head, but can’t.

“Waking in a quiet room.”

The lights are moving faster.

“You’re waking now. Waking in a quiet room-”

The pains’ only getting worse.

“- *safe* -”

The darkness swallows him whole.

+++

Hannibal is smirking.

Will doesn’t like it in the slightest.

“Tell me about your mother, Will.”

“Some *lazy* psychiatry, Dr. Lecter.” Will sneers. “Low hanging fruit.”

Hannibal does not respond in any way. He just sits there, waiting patiently.

Will sighs.

“Never knew her.” He finally admits. “She died when I was two.” And then, before Hannibal can even ask, “Suicide.”

Hannibal's expression remains unnervingly blank. "I'm sorry to hear that, Will."

Will shrugs. "Postpartum's a bitch."

"So I've been told." Hannibal says. He cocks his head a bit. "Do you blame yourself for your mother's death, Will?"

"Does it really matter if I do or not?" Will snaps.

"Clearly, it does." Hannibal says. He's quiet for a moment. "Was it your mother you inherited your disorder from?"

"Yes." Will says shortly.

"And what about your father?" Hannibal asks next. "How did he die?"

"Cirrhosis." Will says flatly. "Four years ago."

"He drank?"

"Like a fish." Will tells him bitterly.

"I take it you weren't close."

"Not at all."

"And you resent him for it?"

“Wouldn’t you?” Will asks him, a little desperately. “If your father loved whiskey more than you?”

Hannibal considers him.

“Yes.” He says, and from the way he says it, Will knows he’s being honest. It catches him off guard, and makes what Hannibal asks next hurt only that much more. “I suspect his love of whiskey only worsened as you grew into your empathy?”

Will looks away. “Gotta numb the pain somehow.” He says. “And, as it turns out, Jack’s a hell of a lot cheaper than therapy.”

“Unfortunately.” Hannibal murmurs. He’s still looking at Will like he can’t quite figure him out. “Did your father ever hit you, Will?”

Will glares at him. “Tell me about *your* father.” He demands. “Did he ever hit you?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer him at first. “Both my parents died when I was very young.” He says eventually. “The proverbial orphan until I was adopted by my Uncle Robertus when I was sixteen.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Will snaps.

“Quid pro quo, Will.” Hannibal says. “I’ll answer your question only when you’ve answered mine.”

Will looks away.

“You’ve already taken everything from me.” He says. “My past is still the only thing that’s mine.” He glances back at Hannibal. “You’re not taking that as well.” He tells him firmly.

From the corner of his eye, he can tell that Hannibal’s smirk has softened to a smile. “You’ve gotten bolder since I brought you here, Will.” He says. “There was a time once when you wouldn’t dare refuse me the way you did just now.”

“Sorry if that bothers you.” Will mutters, not sorry in the least.

“On the contrary.” Hannibal reassures him. “I enjoy it very much.” He sits back in his chair. “In fact, I think it merits a reward.”

+++

“Get dressed, Will.”

Will looks up from his book, blinking at the stack of clothes that Hannibal holds out for him to take.

“What?” He asks, confused.

“Get dressed.” Hannibal repeats, setting the clothes down at the end of Will’s bed by his feet. “Please.”

Will studies the clothes - insulated pants, thick socks, a base layer and flannel shirt, waterproof boots - and feels his confusion turn quickly to concern.

“Why?” He asks, suspicious.

“You can hardly go out in just a tee shirt and bare feet, Will.” Hannibal tells him firmly. “It’s too cold.”

“But where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” Hannibal tells him. He waits a moment, and when Will doesn’t move, he adds, “Get dressed, Will. I insist.”

Will heaves a sigh and drags himself to his feet. Hannibal makes a point of watching him change clothes, and once he’s finally dressed, he offers him his hand. “Come along, Will.”

And because Will knows he doesn’t really have a choice, he lays his hand in Hannibal’s and allows himself to be led first from his room and then up the basement stairs. Hannibal doesn’t release him when they come to the first floor. Instead, he takes him down the hall and to a door Will’s never been behind before. He hold his breath as Hannibal pulls it open-

He blinks. “The garage?”

“How else would we go anywhere?” Hannibal asks, amused.

“But I don’t understand.” Will says, a little nervous as Hannibal guides him to his car. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise, Will.” Hannibal tells him, opening the passenger side door for him. “Please, sit.”

Once he’s settled himself in place, Hannibal then surprises Will again when he leans down and reclines his seat just slightly back.

“What’s that for?” Will asks him, wary.

“You’re going to be taking a little nap now, Will.” Hannibal tells him, and from his pocket he retrieves a small, white pill. “Here, take this.”

Will recoils instantly. “I don’t want to.”

“It’s just Dramamine, Will.” Hannibal soothes him gently. “Extra Strength. There’s no need to be scared.”

“But I don’t need it.” Will says, inching even further back. “Hannibal, *please* , I don’t want it!”

“We have a very long and rather complicated drive ahead of us, Will.” Hannibal tells him patiently. “I need to watch the road, not you, and, unfortunately, I’m afraid I just don’t trust that you’ll behave yourself for me.”

“I will!” Will tries to tell him, but Hannibal ignores him, lifting the little pill up to his lips. Will turns his head like a child. “Please! I’ll be good, I swear! Please don’t make me!”

“Take it, Will.” Hannibal says, his voice gentle. “Please. I promise you’ll be glad you did.”

Will hesitates a moment longer. “Where are we going?” He tries again.

“You’ll see.” Hannibal tells him, smiling at him fondly. “Come on, now, sweet boy. Open up.”

Will heaves a sigh, and then slowly parts his lips. Hannibal slips the little pill inside his mouth. “Good boy.” He says, and waits until Will swallows before moving to his own side of the car. Once he’s seated, Hannibal then reaches behind him and pulls a coat from the backseat, which he then drapes over Will like a blanket.

“Are you ready?” He asks, and Will nods, his eyes already drooping. Hannibal smiles. “Good.” He says before he starts the car. He then backs slowly from the garage and pulls into the street.

“I’ll be honest with you, Will.” He says as he switches gears. “I’m pleasantly surprised - I didn’t actually expect you to cooperate with me.”

“It was either that or a shot.” Will grumbles. Across from him, Hannibal hums. Emboldened, Will then continues on, “And besides,” He says, “Whatever it is you’re planning, you’re not gonna kill me.”

“You sound very certain.”

“I am. Who else would you talk to if I die?”

“I have friends.” Hannibal says, a little defensively.

“None who know you like I do.” Will yawns. “I’m the only one you can really be yourself around.”

Hannibal’s quiet for a moment. “Yes, you are.” He agrees, his voice soft. Beside him, Will nods, his eyes drooping lower and lower.

He’s asleep before they reach the highway.

+++

“Will…Will…Come on, sweetheart, wake up.”

Will groans, and slowly opens his eyes. Night has fallen, and Hannibal is crouched beside him.

“Come on, Will.” He says as he reaches for Will’s seatbelt. “We’re here. Come on, now, up - there’s a good boy, come on.”

“Where are we?” Will mumbles, rubbing at his eyes as Hannibal pulls him to his feet. “Hannibal, what’s happening-”

“Look, Will.” Hannibal whispers in his ear. He keeps his arm around Will’s waist as he sways, unsteady on his feet. “ *Look* .”

Will blinks and looks around. It’s very dark. He can barely see a thing. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust, and it’s only by the distant, silver moonlight that Will finally realizes they’re in a clearing deep within the woods, the pine trees pressing close together all around them.

He slumps a little. “Oh, God.” He whimpers. “You *are* gonna kill me.”

Hannibal chuckles. “Hardly.” He says. “Listen.”

Will frowns, wondering what he means, and it’s just when he’s about to open his mouth again to complain that he hears it - the gentle babble of a nearby stream.

Will turns, following the sound. “Where are we?” He asks, staggering eagerly toward the treeline.

“Shenandoah Park.” Hannibal says from a few feet behind him. “Specifically, the Thornton River, near the Caravan Campgrounds.”

Will stops, and slowly turns around, staring at him. “You brought me to Shenandoah?”

“We can’t fish.” Hannibal tells him, apologetic. “I can’t risk someone seeing you. But I thought that seeing it would be enough.”

Will nods, his throat tight, and then turns and begins to pick his way through the trees, following the sound of rushing water. Hannibal follows leisurely behind him, watching as Will scrambles over the various rotting logs and icy stones that are strewn across his path. He doesn’t try to stop him until they reach the riverbank.

“Will. Alright, Will that’s far enough. Will. Will, you’re too close, you’re going to - WILL!”

But Will ignores him, and continues on, stumbling into the frigid water.

“Will!” Hannibal snaps, watching from the river’s edge. “Get back here!”

Will takes a few steps further, until the water’s halfway up his thighs. He shivers, and then sinks slowly to his knees.

“ *WILL* !” Hannibal calls, and Will can’t bring himself to care that he actually sounds a little worried. “Get up, *now* ! You’re going to get hypothermia-”

Will leans back until the water laps against his temples, inhaling deeply as he gazes at the stars above. He’s not sure how long he stays there, enjoying the gentle current of the stream, but it feels like both forever and hardly any time at all has passed before a hand suddenly grabs him, hauling him roughly to his feet.

“Come on, get up, *get up* !” Hannibal snarls as he drags Will back to shore. “You’re going to give yourself pneumonia!”

“That’s,” Will says around his chattering teeth, “A myth.”

Hannibal pretends he doesn't hear him. He hauls Will to the car, muttering under his breath the entire time.

"You reckless boy. You *foolish* child." He says, yanking off Will's shoes and shirt before he then wraps him tightly in his coat. "Get in the car."

Will does as he says, shivering so violently that Hannibal has to help him to his seat. Once he's buckled, Hannibal then hurries to his own side and quickly starts the car, turning up the heat as high as it will go.

"Needless to say," Hannibal says, his tone as icy as the river he's just pulled Will out of, "We will not be doing that again."

"S-spoilsport."

"Shush." Hannibal snaps. "Don't talk. We need to get you warm. Take off your clothes."

"You have to buy me dinner first."

" *Will* ." Hannibal says, about as mad as Will has ever seen him, and it's only then he finally remembers the second thing Hannibal can't and won't abide. He reaches under the coat and undoes the button of his pants with numb and clumsy fingers. He struggles to remove his pants and underwear, and when he finally gets them off, Hannibal is quick to throw them in the back.

"If you get sick-"

"I won't."

"Do you have *any* idea how cold it is? It's below freezing!"

“It is not!” Will whines, still shaking. “I’m fine!”

“For now.” Hannibal mutters as he begins to pull away. He inhales deep and slow, as though he’s trying to calm down. “Are you warm enough?” He asks Will next, kinder than he was before.

Will nods. “Where are we going?” He asks, looking first one way, then the other.

“We,” Hannibal says firmly. “Are going home. And then you’re going to eat and have a bath-”

“I don’t want a bath!”

“You smell like a lake.” Hannibal informs him, and if Will wasn’t so cold, he’d laugh at just how irked he sounds. “I won’t put up with it for any longer than I have to.”

Will heaves a sigh, and leans back in his seat. “You’re not gonna let me take it myself, are you?”

“No. Consider it your punishment.”

“Hmm. Worth it.” Will says, eyes fluttering halfway shut. Outside, the trees hang heavy over the winding road ahead. He’s quiet for a moment. “Thank you, Hannibal.” He finally whispers.

Hannibal glances over at him. “For what, Will?”

“For that.” Will says. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed the water.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer him at first. “I'm going to be very upset if you get sick, Will.” Is all he says.

“Don’t worry.” Will yawns. “I won’t.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks so much for reading!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> Before you read, please note: this story is already one gigantic non-con/dub-con nightmare. At the end of this chapter, there are going to be discussion of some really dark things that are non-con in nature.
>
> That being said, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will sits with one hand cradling his head, his elbow propped against the table, and the other curled around his spoon, pushing his food sluggishly around his plate.

“Will. Eat, please.”

Will sighs. Slowly, reluctantly, he scoops a little more kudal onto his spoon and lifts it to his mouth. He chews it slowly, his stomach churning, and after several minutes pass, forces himself to swallow it down.

“I’m…I’m done.” He mumbles, hoping against hope Hannibal will be satisfied with what he’s managed so far and praying he won’t force him to have any more.

Hannibal glances over at his plate with a frown.

“Try and eat a little more, Will.” He says before turning back to his own meal.

“I can’t-”

“Just try, Will.”

Will swallows down a whine and dips his spoon once more into the dish. It takes his stomach a few minutes to settle long enough to attempt another bite, and several more to gulp it down. He feels unpleasantly full, almost sick, and Will knows he won’t be able to eat any more.

“D-done.” He insists with a whimper, pushing his plate away. “I’m done.”

“Will.” Hannibal says, his voice low, a warning, but Will just shakes his head.

“I can’t eat any more - I can’t!”

“You hardly ate any of your breakfast this morning either.” Hannibal sighs, taking Will’s nearly full plate and stacking it inside his empty one on the bed tray. “Are you alright, Will? Do you feel sick?”

“Just not hungry.” Will mumbles, hugging himself tight. Hannibal’s frown deepens as he studies him, eyes roving slowly over his pale face and hunched shoulders. Without a word, he reaches out and lays his palm across Will’s forehead. Will jumps at the sudden touch, and tries to push his hand away, but Hannibal holds firm.

“You’re a bit warm.” He murmurs, more to himself than to Will, and a moment later, pulls away. “Go sit on your bed, Will.”

“Why?” Will asks, immediately on edge.

“Because I want you to be comfortable. Go on, now.” Hannibal tells him before rising to his feet and moving to the rolling cart across the room.

Will does as he’s asked and drags himself back to his bed, watching anxiously as Hannibal riffles through the drawers.

“Are…are you gonna put another feeding tube in?” Will asks, his voice dangerously thin. Hannibal looks sharply over at him. He seems surprised when he sees how close to tears Will is.

“Oh, Will.” He sighs, taking something from the rolling cart and moving swiftly back toward Will. “No. No, I’m not going to punish you like that, sweetheart. I’m just going to take your temperature, that’s all.” So saying he then holds out his hand, showing Will the little glass thermometer he’s grabbed. “Open up.”

Will sniffs, and slowly opens his mouth. Hannibal carefully slips it under his tongue.

“Two minutes.” He tells him, and while they wait, he begins to gently palpate the lymph nodes in Will’s throat.

He frowns again.

“Let me check your lungs.” He says before he goes to grab his stethoscope. He quickly slips the bell beneath Will’s shirt, despite his muffled protests, and presses it firmly to his chest.

“Deep breath in.” He says. “Good.” He moves the bell a little over. “And out…good.”

He goes back and forth across Will’s chest a couple times and then moves to his back. Will squirms as he drags the icy bell against his skin, and sighs, relieved, when he finally pulls away.

“Your lungs are clear.” He tells him, looping the stethoscope around his neck and reaching for the thermometer that Will is busy rolling under his tongue. “Let’s see…ninety-nine point nine. It would seem you have a fever, Will.”

“Oh, come on, that barely counts-”

“Lie down.” Hannibal says, ignoring him. “I need to examine you.”

“No.” Will says, rubbing his aching eyes. Hannibal’s been like this since Shenandoah, worrying at every little cough and every ill-timed sneeze, and it’s quickly getting old. “I wanna sleep.”

“You can sleep as soon as I’ve finished checking you.” Hannibal says, reaching for him. “Come on, now, lie back-”

“I’m not sick.” Will insists, pushing him away.

“Will, you’ve barely eaten anything all day-”

“It’s probably because I’ve had a headache for the past two days.” Will snaps. “I hardly got any sleep last night.”

“You have a headache?”

Will nods, miserable.

“Would you like some aspirin?” Hannibal asks, his voice soft.

Will considers this, then nods again. Hannibal chuckles.

“Alright.” He says before moving once more to the cart. Will sways slightly where he sits, watching as he unlocks the first drawer and retrieves a tiny bottle from inside.

“Here, Will.” Hannibal says, handing him two pills. “Wait, let me get you some water-”

Will knocks them back before Hannibal even has the chance to turn around.

He sighs. “Darling, please stop doing that.” He says. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

“Only way I know how.”

“Hmm.” Hannibal hums, pushing Will’s hair out of his eyes. He’s quiet for a moment, studying him closely. “Perhaps I should cancel my afternoon appointments.”

Will groans. “No!” He whines, flopping back against his bed. The last thing that he wants is to be poked and prodded every fifteen minutes.

“Will, I don’t think you should be left alone right now-”

“I’m fine! I don’t need you to stay and babysit me!”

“If you’re sick-”

“I’m not! I just need to sleep! I’ll probably be better before you even get back!”

Hannibal heaves another long suffering sigh.

“Alright, Will.” He says. “I’ll let you be. But I’m going to be checking the webcam between patients. If I see anything I don’t like, if you need me for any reason, I’m coming straight home. Understand?”

Will nods, his eyes already fluttering shut. Hannibal takes the blanket and tucks it close around his shoulders.

"Sleep well, Will." He says before he turns away. "Hopefully, you'll feel better by tonight."

+++

Will spends the next few hours tossing restlessly beneath his sheets and drifting in and out of fitful, nightmare-riddled sleep. He shivers and pants, biting back whimpers and moans, and his headache only worsens as the day drags slowly on. By the time Hannibal returns, he's completely drenched in sweat and half-delirious with fever.

"Will?" He hears, and the most that he can manage is a flinch when he feels someone cup his forehead. "Will, wake up."

Will opens his eyes and sees that Hannibal is leaning over his bed rails, frowning at him.

"You're very warm." He says, and a moment later Will feels something brush against his lip. He whimpers, and tries to turn his head. "Shh. It's alright, it's just the thermometer, that's all. Come on, Will, open up - there's a good boy."

He slips the thermometer beneath Will's tongue and makes a point of holding it in place.

"H…Han'bal-"

"Shh. Don't talk, Will." Hannibal says as he runs his fingers through Will's sweaty hair. "Poor boy, you must feel awful."

Will hums, his eyelids drooping. He's nearly drifted off to sleep again by the time Hannibal pulls it out.

“A hundred and two.” Hannibal pronounces, as though from a great distance. He sounds worried. “Will? Will, darling, wake up. We need to try and get your fever down. Sit up for me.”

Will groans as Hannibal hauls him to his feet and then helps him over to the chair that’s stationed by his bed. Will shivers as he lowers him down.

“I’m cold.”

“It’s your fever, dear.” Hannibal says as he tucks his jacket over him. “You’ll feel warmer once we get your temperature back down.”

Will’s quiet as he turns away, blinking heavily at Hannibal as he strips the sweat-soaked blankets from his bed. Once he’s done, he then moves to the linen closet, and retrieves clean sheets for him to sleep on. Will can’t help but sniffle as he begins to make his bed.

Hannibal looks over at the sound.

“Will?” He asks, his voice soft. “Are you alright?”

Will shakes his head. “S-sorry.” He says, embarrassed, wiping at his eyes. “I don’t…know what’s wrong with me.”

“You’re sick sweetheart.” Hannibal says as he finishes straightening his sheets. “That’s all. No need to apologize. Or get upset.” Satisfied, he then turns back to Will. “Let’s get you changed.” He says in that same kind tone as before. “Then you can go back to bed. I’m sure you must be tired.”

Will nods, slumping slightly in his chair. He watches silently as Hannibal moves to crouch before him.

“Arms up, Will.”

Will’s shivering grows violent as he’s divested of his shirt and pants, and once he’s stripped completely bare Hannibal then goes to the sink. He wets a washcloth while Will curls up tightly in the chair, trying to shield himself as best he can.

“Here, Will.” Hannibal says when he returns a moment later, and begins to wipe the dried sweat from his chest and neck. Will whimpers, and tries to pull away, but Hannibal is quick to shush him. “Almost done.” He says before moving to Will’s back. “That’s got to feel better, doesn’t it?”

Reluctantly, Will nods, and Hannibal offers him a faint smile before rising to his feet. Will shivers, miserable, as Hannibal retrieves a stack of clothing from the linen cabinet and then moves to the rolling cart beside it, taking something from inside.

“Sit up, Will.” He says when he returns. “I know, I know.” He coos as Will begins to whine. “I just need to get you dressed, and then you can lay down. Alright?”

Will nods again, eyes fluttering shut. He jerks a moment later when he feels Hannibal lift his foot and slip it down through something soft and plastic.

“I don’t need that!” He cries as Hannibal drags the diaper halfway to his knees. “Take it off!”

“Will, you have a temperature of a hundred and two.” Hannibal tells him patiently. “If it goes any higher, it’s likely that you’ll have a seizure-”

“No, I won’t!”

“Will, you’re clearly prone to them. You’ve already had three since you got here-”

Will jerks as though he has been slapped. “ *What* ? What are you talking about? No I haven’t!”

Hannibal looks up at him. He seems confused, concerned. “You don’t remember?”

“I don’t remember because they never happened! You’re lying!” Will all but shrieks, trying to edge away from him. “I’ve never had a seizure!”

“Will, a fair percentage of people diagnosed with Hyper Empathetic Disorder are also epileptic.” Hannibal reminds him gently. “It’s thought the higher density of mirror neurons causes increased misfiring-”

“No, no, you’re lying! You’re just saying that to scare me!”

“I’m not lying, Will. I have the security footage of your room to prove it. I can show you if you’d like, but I’d really rather not. The last thing that I want is to upset you any more.” He cocks his head, watching as Will bites his lip, and looks at him with pity. “You really don’t remember?” He asks, his voice soft.

Will bursts into tears at that, wrapping his arms around his middle and rocking back and forth. He remembers now, vaguely, like a half-forgotten memory of a dream, a flashing, swinging light, and Hannibal’s voice as if from very far away, “ *You had a seizure.”*

“No, no, no!” He sobs, shrinking back from Hannibal when he tries to take him in his arms. “Don’t touch me!”

“Will, it’s alright. It’s alright. I know it’s frightening-”

“You did something to me!” Will wails as Hannibal pulls him down into his lap. “I know you did! *I know it* !”

“You’re delirious, Will.” Hannibal says soothingly, running his hand through his hair. “We need to try and get your fever down. Can you take a breath for me? Come on, Will, deep breath.”

It takes him a few tries, and no small amount of coaxing from Hannibal, but eventually Will manages a small, shuddering gasp.

“There we go.” Hannibal says, rubbing his back. “Again.”

Will manages another couple shaky breaths and then collapses weakly against Hannibal’s broad chest.

“Let’s get you dressed and back in bed.” Hannibal says, his voice soft. “You’re exhausted.”

“I don’t want a diaper.” Will whines, hiding his face in the crook of Hannibal’s neck. “I don’t need it. You’re trying to humiliate me.”

“It’s just a precaution, Will, that’s all. In case you have another accident.” Hannibal tells him. “It’ll be easier to clean you up if you’re wearing it. Alright?”

Too tired to argue any more, Will nods. Hannibal then pulls him to his feet, and Will holds on to him as he tugs the diaper up his legs and into place. Will’s mortified he’s wearing it, hates the noises that he hears with every little movement that he makes, and avoids Hannibal’s eyes as he helps him step inside his pants.

“There we go.” Hannibal murmurs once he’s fully dressed. “All done.”

Will sniffs, feeling very brittle as Hannibal guides him back to bed.

“I’m cold.” He complains as he settles underneath his sheets.

“I’ll get you another blanket.” Hannibal promises as he runs his fingers through his hair. “But you need to let me go first.”

Will huffs and reluctantly releases him. Once he’s free, Hannibal moves swiftly to the linen closet for his blanket and then over to the cart again, where he retrieves a bottle of medicine before coming back to Will.

“Here we are.” He says as he drapes the blanket over him. “Better?”

Will nods, blinking heavily as Hannibal begins to stroke his hair.

“We need to get your fever down now, Will.” He tells him, his voice soft. “Can you swallow something for me?”

“Swallow what?” Will asks, eyeing the little bottle that he has suspiciously.

“Aspirin.” Hannibal says, showing him the label. “Now come on, open up.”

But Will turns away, glaring hatefully at a spot on the wall.

“Would an IV be easier?”

Will looks quickly back at him with wide eyes and pulls his arms close to his chest.

Hannibal chuckles softly. “Alright. Alright.” He soothes. “I promise I won’t place one unless I have to. But you need to cooperate with me, Will.” He offers Will the two tablets again. “Here.”

Will swallows thickly and slowly opens up his mouth. Hannibal slips the medicine inside but stops Will when he starts to tilt his head.

" *Don't* swallow without water." Hannibal tells him firmly, reaching for a nearby cup and holding the rim up to his lips. "Here, drink this."

Will does as he's told and only once he's gulped everything down does Hannibal let him go.

"Comfortable?"

Will nods, rolling to his side and burying his face in his pillow.

"Can I bring you anything? Books? A cold pack for your head?"

Will shakes his head as his eyes slip slowly shut.

"Alright." Hannibal says, reaching down to gently pat Will's back. "I'll be back to check on you in a little bit. Until then, try and get some sleep, Will - you need it."

Hannibal's hand is a comforting weight on his shoulder. His voice is soothing, like a lullaby…

Will's asleep before he leaves.

+++

It's the sound of cutlery that wakes him.

Will blinks and turns his head, squinting at the figure by his feet.

“Smells delicious.” He mumbles, his voice scratchy, and Hannibal looks up at him with a smile.

“Silkie chicken in a broth.” He says, “A black boned bird, prized in China for its medicinal values since the seventh century. Wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise.”

Will sits up, still blinking heavily. “You made me chicken soup?”

Hannibal sighs defeatedly.

“Yes.” He says, lifting the bed tray up over Will’s lap. “I want you to try and eat as much as you can, Will.” He tells him, his tone firm. “Alright?”

Will heaves a sigh and nods.

“Good.” Hannibal says, sinking to the chair beside Will’s bed. He watches as Will takes his spoon with shaking hands and dips it in the soup. “Do you need help?”

Will stubbornly shakes his head. “How long was I asleep?” He asks as he scoops a bit of chicken on his spoon.

“A couple hours. In fact, you’re almost due for another dose of aspirin.” Hannibal says, still watching closely as Will lifts the spoon and slips it in his mouth. He finally seems to relax a little when Will swallows. “How are you feeling? Any better?”

Will shrugs, avoiding his eyes.

Without a word, Hannibal reaches out and gently cups his cheek. “You’re still a little warm.” He murmurs.

“I’m fine.” Will insists, blushing furiously. “You worry too much.”

“Considering the fact you were almost fully submerged in a freezing-cold, bacteria-filled river in the middle of December, Will,” Hannibal says primly. “You should be glad I’m handling this as well as I am - after all, who knows what you were exposed to during your little midnight swim?”

“Can’t be any worse than the cannibalistic serial-killer I’m exposed to every day, wouldn’t you say?”

It’s the closest Hannibal has ever come to rolling his eyes, and Will grins at him, triumphant, but sobers quickly as he studies his expression.

“This is something that’s happened to you before, isn’t it?” He asks.

“What is?”

“Someone getting sick.”

“I was an emergency room doctor, Will.” Hannibal reminds him, smirking slightly. “I saw sick people everyday-”

“Yeah, but this is different.” Will says, his voice soft. “None of those people *mattered* , not to you. Not like…” He trails off then, a little overwhelmed. “Someone did, once. They mattered more than anything, and they got sick…and no one’s mattered to you since.”

Hannibal looks over at him. “You matter.”

Will blinks at that, surprised.

Hannibal smiles slightly, nodding at Will's bed tray.

"Finish your soup."

+++

Will wakes up gasping, drenched in sweat, and shaking.

The air is burning cold. The lights are bright above him, and slightly blurred around their edges. There's a stabbing pain behind his eyes, and as Will lies panting in his tangled, dampened sheets, the room begins to slowly spin.

He whimpers, shuts his eyes.

His chest feels tight. His throat is raw. His thoughts are fleeting, hard to grasp, as Will drifts vaguely in and out of consciousness. He's not sure where he is. He doesn't understand what's happening. He doesn't even know what's real - at times, Will thinks he might be dreaming - there's movement (quick and violent) in the corners of his vision, and voices whisper to him from the shadows, calling him by name.

Will…Will…Will, can you hear me? Will, wake up…

He jumps when he feels fingers brush against his cheek and settle gently on his forehead.

You're burning up …

Will sobs, afraid, as something prods his lip.

Will, open your mouth. It's alright, don't be scared. I need to take your temperature. Come on, sweetheart…

It's in his mouth. Will tries to spit it out, but there's a hand wrapped firm around his jaw, holding it in place.

Shh. You're alright. Everything's alright. It'll all be over soon. I promise…

It's gone a moment later.

Hundred and five…

The lights are humming. The pain behind his eyes is getting worse. There's a tingling in his palms -

Will? Will, listen to me. You're very sick. I need to get your fever…Will? Will-!"

- every muscle seems to seize at once. It's painful. He feels like he's not getting any air. He sputters, chokes, and someone rolls him quickly to his side. There's a hand around his wrist and fingers pressed against his pulse. Time is fluid, spilling. He's not sure how long it takes before the shaking finally dies back down.

…mild seizure. You're alright…

Will sobs. There isn't any part of him that doesn't hurt. His cheeks are wet. The taste of blood is on his tongue. There's something cold and damp between his legs.

There’s fingers carding through his hair.

“Will? Will, can you hear me?”

He nods weakly, his eyes fluttering. Hannibal is leaning over him.

“You have a fever, Will. A bad one.” He tells him, his voice soft. “I need to give you a bath.”

“Don’t want a bath.” Will moans as Hannibal helps him loop his arms around his neck.

“I know, but you need one, dear. We need to get your fever down. Up we go.”

Will sobs as he lifts him in his arms, the world spinning in a nauseatingly smear of color.

“No bath!” He begs, clinging tight to Hannibal as he carries him away. “Please, please, I don’t need it!”

“Shh. It’s alright. I’ve got you. Will, darling, don’t cry, it’s just a bath. You’ll feel better once you’ve had it.”

Will whimpers, squirming as he’s laid gently on the ground. He shivers, gasping weakly. The tile is like ice against his skin, and Will sobs a moment later when he hears the sound of running water.

He knows what happens next.

“No, no, no!” He begs as hands reach for his clothes and begin to strip him down. “Please, no!”

“Will. Darling, listen to me. It’s just a bath to bring your fever down, that’s all. Nothing bad is going to happen-”

That’s a lie. Bad things always happen when they put him in the bath.

“... *What* ?” There’s a hand cupping his face. “Will, what did you say?”

Will groans, and weakly turns his head.

“Please.” He says, voice no more than a whisper, hoping that this time they’ll show mercy. “Please, I’m not crazy. I’m not supposed to be here - my daddy brought me here because he doesn’t want me anymore, not because I’m crazy. I’m not crazy, I’m not. You have to believe me. Please, *please* , believe me...”

A beat of heavy silence passes.

“Come on, Will.” The voice says, quiet. “Let’s go.”

Then the world abruptly tilts, and Will is once more lifted in the air. He shrieks, thrashing, as he’s lowered down into the bath, water sloshing down its sides.

“No, stop! It hurts! *It hurts* !”

“Shh. Will, it’s alright.” There’s arms around him, holding him down. “It’s alright. I’m right here. You’re alright-”

“Please, *please* , let me out!” He’s panicking - he can’t get out. He needs to get out! “You’re hurting me!”

“I’m trying to help you, Will. I know it’s cold, but that’s only because your temperature’s so high-”

“Let me out!” Will begs, sobbing loudly. “Please, I promise I’ll be good!”

“You’re being *so* good, Will.” The voice is cooing. “And so brave. I just need you to be brave a little while longer. Can you do that?”

Will sobs, collapsing back against the tub.

“Shh. It’s alright. You’re alright. Almost done, Will. Just a couple more minutes and then you can get out…”

It’s torture, being held beneath the water, though the arms that hold him hold him well - they’re as gentle as they’re firm, and voices whisper soothing words inside his ear, words he doesn’t know, but have the lulling cadence of a nursery rhyme.

“ *Ein Mannlein steht im Walde ganz still und-”*

He shivers, helpless. It takes everything he has to simply stay awake. Time skips and then it drags, and through it all, Will can do little more than sob and shake and pray that it will all be over soon.

“Alright, Will. That’s long enough. Let’s get you out. Easy, *easy* -”

He’s lifted up, with water pouring off of him in buckets. He gasps - the air is biting cold against his puckered skin, and Will whimpers as he’s slowly laid against the tile once again, black spots dancing in the corners of his vision.

“Shh, Will. It’s alright. You’re alright.” There are hands touching him, patting him dry. The dots are getting bigger. “You can make it all go away.” The voice tells him, sounding very far away. “Put your head back. Close your eyes. Wade into the quiet of the stream.”

Then the darkness swallows him up, and Will knows no more.

+++

Will wakes up in his bed, his blankets tucked carefully around him. He blinks, his thoughts hazy, and when he turns his head, he sees that Hannibal is sitting at his side.

“Hello, Will.” He says, his voice soft, as if anything more than a whisper would be enough to break Will apart. Will swallows thickly.

“…’lo.” He rasps back, and Hannibal is quick to grab a cup of water that’s sitting on the rolling cart beside him. He brings it to Will’s lips.

“Here.” He says, cradling Will’s head. “Slowly, slowly…good boy.”

He waits until Will pulls away, and then sets the cup aside.

“How are you feeling?” He asks, easing Will back down against his pillows.

Will shrugs. “Been better.” The lights are dim. There’s an IV in his arm. His body’s stiff and sore. “W-What happened?”

“You were very sick.” Hannibal tells him, cupping his face. “Your fever spiked last night. Do you remember?”

Will weakly shakes his head. “No.” He whispers.

“I had to give you a bath to bring it back down.” Hannibal continues, his thumb brushing back and forth against Will’s cheek. “You’ve been in and out of consciousness ever since.”

“O-oh.” Will says, not sure what else to say.

“You’re alright now - your fever finally broke a little while ago.” Hannibal reassures him. There’s something tender in his gaze. “Are you hungry? You haven’t eaten anything all day.”

“I…I don’t know.”

“Let’s try.” Hannibal says, and turns back to the rolling cart, reaching past the cup for the bowl that sits behind it. Will watches as he stirs its contents idly, and opens his mouth when Hannibal carefully lowers the spoon to his lips.

He blinks, surprised, at what he tastes.

“A-applesauce?”

“You said you enjoyed it. That your father always brought it for you when you were sick.” Hannibal reminds him, scooping a little more onto the spoon. “I thought that it might be a comfort to you.”

Will swallows, his throat tight, and can’t help but feel a little touched. “Thank you.”

Hannibal nods. “You’re welcome.” He says, feeding him another tiny spoonful. The two of them fall silent after that, and Will only manages a few more bites before he turns his head away. He’s amazed when Hannibal doesn’t try and push him to eat more. Instead, he merely sets the bowl aside and then turns once more to Will, his expression grim.

“Will, dear.” He says. “There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

Will feels his stomach sink at that.

“About what?” He asks, heart fluttering anxiously in his chest.

“About something that you said last night. When you were in the bath.” He reaches out and begins to card his fingers through Will’s hair. “You were crying. You kept saying you weren’t crazy, and that your daddy only brought you here because he didn’t want you anymore.”

Will bites back a groan, and has to stop himself from covering his face.

“What did you mean, Will?”

“I was sick, Hannibal! Who knows what I meant?”

“I think you do.” Hannibal says as he gently strokes Will’s hair. “I think you know exactly what you meant.”

Will looks away, refusing to meet his eyes.

“Will.” Hannibal says, his voice soft. “What happened to you? What did your father do to you?”

“Nothing!”

“Will.”

“It’s no big deal.” Will insists. “I’m fine.”

“Clearly, you’re not. Talk to me, Will. What happened?”

“Why do you even care?” Will snarls, glaring at him. “It’s not like knowing will change anything-”

“You’re right, it won’t.” Hannibal agrees serenely.“It won’t change what happened to you, and I’m sure it won’t change how you feel, but even so, I think that it would help. Burying your pain won’t make it heal, Will, it will only make it fester. So, please, tell me - what happened?”

Will heaves a sigh, knowing he won’t let it go, and slumps miserably against his pillows.

“My mom had Hyper Empathetic Disorder too.” He says, gazing at the ceiling. “She suffered with it for years. She was always in and out of psychiatric care when she was growing up. She calmed down a bit after she met my dad - he loved her, and she was happy because he was happy. It didn’t get bad again until after she had me.” Will closes his eyes. “Apparently, being able to empathize with a baby…it can be overwhelming.”

“Children’s emotions are much bigger than an adult’s.” Hannibal points out. “They need to learn to regulate their feelings, and until they do, everything is new and confusing and often frightening for them. It’s understandable that she would struggle.”

“Yeah, well. It got to her. She killed herself when I was two. And I was diagnosed a few years later.”

“Is that when your father started drinking?”

“He couldn’t handle it.” Will tells him, shaking slightly. “The tantrums, the mood swings, the night terrors…he didn’t know what to do. We were poor, he couldn’t…he did the best he could.”

“I’m sure he did.” Hannibal says. “Right until the very moment that he couldn’t.”

“It was easier when I was little.” Will says. “He could pick me up. Hold me until I calmed down.”

“And what happened when you got older? What did he do then?”

Will bites his lip, tears pricking his eyes.

“He…he couldn’t do it anymore. I was…a burden. When I was fifteen, he…he decided he didn’t want to deal with me any more. So one night he…he gave me a beer. Mixed it with some Quaaludes. And when I was falling over myself, he took me to a pediatric mental hospital. He told them I had Hyper Empathetic Disorder, and that I was going through a dissociative episode. He…he left me there.”

Beside him, Hannibal is quiet. “For how long?” He finally asks.

“A couple days.” Will shrugs. “It only took a few hours for me to snap out of it, but the hospital insisted on keeping me another forty-eight hours. For observation.”

“And did anything happen to you while you were in the hospital, Will?” Hannibal asks. “Did anyone…hurt you…while you were there?”

Will heaves a shuddering breath. “The orderlies, they…they made me take ice baths.” He says, voice wavering. “They held me down. They…they did things, they…”

Hannibal’s gaze is fire and ice fury. “Did they rape you?”

“No, no.” Will says, shaking his head. “They just…” he trails off, gesturing vaguely to his lower half. He sighs. “They knew I wasn’t crazy.” He says. “That someone might believe me if I ever said what happened. They couldn't…they knew they had to be careful. They couldn’t hurt me like they hurt the other kids.”

Will can see the muscles in Hannibal’s jaw clenching.

“What they did to you was wrong, Will.” He tells him. “It shouldn’t have happened.”

“I know.” Will says, picking at a loose thread in his sheets. “It’s just that…I know what they did to the other kids was worse. I could hear them crying at night. Begging.” He swallows thickly. “I could handle…what they did to me.” He says. “I could handle the ice baths, and the straightjackets, and having pills shoved down my throat. But the nights were always the worst. People crying, screaming in the dark. Listening to them…I-I felt like I was losing my mind.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer him at first.

“Was that the only time your father ever left you at a hospital, Will?” He finally says.

Will shakes his head. “Whenever he needed a break, he’d dose me up again and leave me at the nearest one. He’d come and get me a few days later.”

“And no one ever realized what was happening?” Hannibal asks. Will can’t tell if he’s angry or amazed or a little bit of both.

Will shrugs. “We moved around a lot. No one ever figured it out.”

“How long did this go on?”

“A couple years. It took a while, but I eventually learned how to control it. I avoided eyes and people. Did everything I could to avoid pissing him off.” He sighs. “I left the day I turned eighteen.” He says. “Never went back.”

Hannibal nods. “Atta boy.” He says, and Will can’t help but smile slightly. Beside him, Hannibal looks nothing short of grieved. “I’m sorry that happened to you, Will.”

Will shrugs again, avoiding his eyes.

“Thank you for telling me.” Hannibal then adds, taking Will’s hand in his. “I know it must have been very difficult for you.”

Will doesn’t answer. He gazes at their fingers intertwined together, and hopes he never lets Will go.

His eyes begin to droop.

“Are you tired?”

Will nods, too exhausted for anything else.

“I’ll let you rest, then.” Hannibal murmurs, and to Will’s horror, begins to pull away. “I’ll be back in a little while to check-”

But Will grabs him before he can go any further, clinging to him tightly. Hannibal glances at their hands, and then looks back at Will.

“Will?” He asks, even softer than before. “Are you alright?”

Will inhales a shaky breath. “ *Stay* .” He begs, too terrified to look him in the eye. “P-please.”

A beat of silence passes, and for one awful moment, Will thinks that Hannibal is going to refuse, but then he hears him unlock the railing of his bed. He opens his eyes as Hannibal climbs slowly on the bed and settles down beside him. It’s tight - the bed’s not made for two - but then Hannibal pulls Will close against his chest, and Will thinks that he could stay this way forever.

“Go to sleep, Will.” Hannibal says, tucking a stray curl behind Will’s ear. “Go to sleep.”

Will nods, and lets his eyes fall gently shut.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you liked it!

According to my current outline, we hare halfway through the story - that might change as time goes on (I've already had to split two chapters, that's probably gonna happen again), but we are halfway to the end!

Unfortunately, though, I haven't been happy with the last few chapters, and I have a lot of stuff coming up in the next couple weeks, so I'm going to force myself to take a break from this story for a little while.

See you soon! Take care!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal hasn't slept, he hasn't *moved* , since he settled himself beside Will late last night, and though his back is painfully stiff and his hips ache, he doesn't dare to even think of moving now.

He's too preoccupied with Will, with memorizing the details of his face, and listening to the gentle tide of his breathing. Looking at him, with his head pillowed on his chest - his dark hair falling over his forehead, the full fan of his lashes spread across his pale cheeks, pink lips slightly parted - Hannibal can't help but be enthralled.

He has always been intrigued by Will, from the moment he first met him. Hannibal has always enjoyed beautiful things, and Will was perhaps the loveliest and darkest thing he's ever had the pleasure to encounter.

But now…

It's more than just intrigue that holds Hannibal so fixedly in place. There's something else that stirs inside him every time he looks at Will. Something he hasn't felt in a very long time.

Something he thought he'd never feel again. Not after…

Hannibal closes his eyes.

Even after all this time, just the thought of Mischa is nothing short of agony, and Hannibal's not sure that that will ever change. He's learned by now not to think of her, what happened, to distance himself as far from those memories as he possibly can.

But Will, he…

Will reminds him of Mischa. Far more than he should. There's something so endearingly innocent, something so painfully tragic, about him. Every time Hannibal looks at Will, the mere sight of him is enough for him to feel something stir inside his chest. What he feels for Will is so achingly, uncomfortably familiar to what Hannibal once felt for Mischa, and far too much, too strong, for him to ignore or deny it any longer.

It disturbs him, in a vague kind of way (not that this is unusual - most of Hannibal's emotions are muted and have been since the day that Mischa died). Until he met Will, the strongest emotions he usually felt were either anger or disgust or something in between. He can't remember the last time he felt happy, and until recently, had accepted he might not ever feel it again.

But now.

Now, Hannibal has Will. And he's beginning to feel things he wasn't expecting to feel ever again: love, or something close to it, anyway - a kind of possessive tenderness and the desire to protect, overwhelming in its intensity and too powerful to resist. Hannibal knows even now that there isn't anything he wouldn't do for Will. Nothing he wouldn't do without the slightest hesitation.

He's forgotten just how strong these feelings are.

Has never realized just how *dangerous* they are.

Because these feelings make him vulnerable. Before Will, Hannibal had no weaknesses. Now, he has one, and it's more than enough to finally bring him down. Before Will, he had never once considered that he might get caught. And now, Hannibal knows the possibility is not only very, *very* real, but also very likely, so long as Will remains alive. Will, he knows, will be his undoing, one way or another, and Hannibal's not sure he can accept that.

He shakes his head.

He’s being ridiculous. He needs to get away. He needs to put a stop to this, to Will and the feelings he inspires. Each man kills the thing he loves, and Hannibal is no exception.

He shifts a little, carefully easing himself out from under him, and as he does, Will suddenly stirs. Hannibal immediately freezes, watching as Will mumbles to himself, frowning slightly in his sleep.

“Shh.” Hannibal soothes, reaching up to lightly stroke his cheek. “Shh.”

Will collapses limply back against him with a sigh before rolling over in his sleep. Hannibal holds his breath and slowly pulls away, climbing silently from the bed. He watches Will even as he backs away from the bed and over to the rolling cart across the room.

He’s kept the first two drawers unlocked ever since Will’s sudden fever spike two days ago. He had needed easy access to the medication that he kept inside, and Will had been far too out of it for him to worry about him grabbing something that he shouldn’t. Now, Hannibal pulls open the top drawer and takes out a packaged syringe and a bottle of midazolam. He opens the syringe carefully, trying to keep the paper from crinkling too loudly, and once it’s free, he then fills it to the brim before turning again to Will.

He takes his IV in his hands.

It would be so easy to kill him, while he’s still weak and recovering from both the fever and his seizure - an air bubble in the IV line, any number of medications given in excess or in lethal combinations. But Hannibal doesn’t want Will to suffer, especially when the poor boy’s done nothing wrong, and with an overdose of midazolam, he’ll fade gently, painlessly away.

He won’t even know that he’s dying.

And once he’s gone, Hannibal will do everything he can to hang on to him for as long as he possibly can. He’ll eat his heart first, and the rest of him he’ll either smoke or freeze, consuming him in bits and pieces over the span of weeks, or months, or even years,

celebrating him, until every part of Will is fully part of him. He'll live with Will woven into the very fiber of his being, and he won't ever be without him. There's a comfort in this thought, the knowledge that he'll always have him, that he'll never truly lose him, and Hannibal is eager as he slips the needle in the IV port.

Then Will begins to stir beneath him, and Hannibal knows he needs to act fast. He adjusts his hold on the syringe, and is just about to depress the plunger when Will's eyes slowly flutter open. He blinks, gazing sleepily at Hannibal.

And then he smiles.

"Hmm. Hi." He murmurs, and the moment that he hears his voice, whatever resolve Hannibal has to kill Will immediately crumbles.

He swallows thickly.

"Good morning." He says, not trusting himself to speak at any louder than a whisper. "How are you feeling?"

Will yawns. "I'm alright." He says. "Better than last night, anyway."

"Good." Hannibal says, pulling the needle from the port and hiding it at his side. With his other hand he then reaches for Will's forehead. "Are you hungry?"

Will nuzzles into his palm with a sigh. "A little."

This boy will be his downfall. Not hubris or whimsy like he thought, but Will.

Just Will and the way he's looking at him now.

“Is there anything you’d like?” Hannibal asks, voice shaking slightly as he begins to stroke Will’s hair. There isn’t anything he wouldn’t bring him if he asked. Nothing he wouldn’t do if it meant that he’d see Will every day this way, forever.

Will considers for a moment, chewing on his lip.

“Just…just plain toast, please.”

“That’s not very much.” Hannibal tells him, pushing his hair back across his forehead. Will shrugs, avoiding his eyes. Hannibal frowns. “Is there anything else I can get you, darling?” He asks.

Will hesitates. He looks embarrassed. “Can…can I have some more applesauce?” He asks, glancing over at him. “Please?”

He sounds so shy, so uncertain, as though he expects Hannibal to refuse, and it’s enough to make him melt. Silly boy, doesn’t he know there isn’t anything he wouldn’t do for him? That there isn’t anything that he’d deny him if he asked?

“Of course, Will.” Hannibal says, tucking his blankets a little more tightly around him before he turns away. “I’ll be right back. In the meantime, get some rest.”

“I’ve *been* resting for hours-”

“And now, you’re going to rest some more.” Hannibal says firmly. “You had a *seizure* , Will. You’re still recovering - I’d hate to have you relapse. Wouldn’t you?”

Will grumbles to himself, but settles back against his pillows with little more than a huff. Hannibal waits until he shuts his eyes, and then turns and leaves the room.

He drops the needle in the sharps container he has stashed at the foot of the basement stairs as he passes it by, biting back a sigh as he does.

He's in trouble, and he knows it.

The boy's bewitched him, in every conceivable way. Hannibal is completely devoted to him, body, mind, and soul. He is hopelessly, irretrievably in love with him.

And God help him if Will ever finds that out.

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Over the next few days, Hannibal keeps a close eye on Will, carefully monitoring his temperature, blood pressure, and calorie intake as he slowly recovers. Will, for his part, does not appreciate his efforts in the slightest, whining and pouting and squirming each time Hannibal tries to examine him, and spends every second he's awake completely disregarding his advice to not push himself. The first time Hannibal catches him trying to stand without assistance, he almost has a heart attack.

" *Ne* !" He snaps, sweeping Will up off his feet and into the cradle of his arms. He ignores Will's ear-piercing squawk of protest as he dumps him on his bed. "Absolutely not - haven't I told you a dozen times already I don't want you standing up without my help?"

"I'm fine!" Will whines, attempting to sit up and batting weakly at Hannibal's hands when he pushes him back down. "You're being ridiculous!"

"Your blood pressure's still far too low." Hannibal reminds him firmly. "You could faint. What if you do, and I'm not there to catch you? Forgive me, but I don't care how fine you feel, Will - I won't have you risk a head injury."

"Oh my God!" Will groans, covering his face with his hands. "You are the absolute worst!"

“I assure you I could be much worse.” Hannibal says, pressing the back of his hand against Will’s cool forehead. “Would you prefer I tie you to the bed again?”

The look of horror Will gives him almost - *almost* - makes Hannibal regret the threat entirely, but then Will quickly shakes his head, and he decides that he regrets absolutely nothing.

“Good boy.” He murmurs, patting Will once more on the head before he pulls away. “I’m going to bring you some lunch.” He says as he begins to turn around. “Don’t even think about trying to get up while I’m gone.”

Will mutters something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like “couillon”, but Hannibal ignores it - he has far more pressing concerns than a few choice words spoken in a moment of frustration, after all.

He’s going back to work tomorrow, and he’s becoming increasingly anxious at the thought of leaving Will alone, despite the fact he knows he has every reason not to be. Will is fine - he hasn’t had a fever in days, he’s eaten every meal that Hannibal has brought him without issue or complaint, and he no longer trembles when completing even the most basic of physical tasks. He’s fine - Hannibal knows this, *he knows this* , and yet he finds that he can’t bear the thought of being away from him even for a second…

Because he wants Will at his side, forever, at all times. Wants to feel the warm weight of his body pressed against his own, to hear the rhythm of his breathing, the sound of his voice, and know that they are alive, and alive together in each other. He needs Will like he needs air, and every moment that he’s with him is euphoric. Because when he’s with Will, he doesn’t feel alone anymore. And Hannibal has been alone for so long, he never wants to feel that way again.

But even so, Hannibal knows he has no choice. It’s only for a little while, and besides, he’s promised Jack he’d meet with him for lunch. Something about needing Hannibal’s help with building a new profile. And really…

How could he refuse?

+++

There's something about walking the halls of the BAU, knowing everyone he sees is trying so desperately to catch him and yet has no idea who he is, that Hannibal finds wildly amusing. He has to stop himself from smirking as he makes his way to Jack Crawford's office, and instead looks curiously around the hallowed halls of the FBI, glancing at the wanted posters on the walls and into the lecture halls he passes.

"Hannibal?"

Hannibal stops, turning to see a familiar figure hovering in a nearby door, a stack of files in her arms. He smiles.

"Hello, Alana." He says, closing the short distance between them. "What a pleasant surprise - I had no idea you were working for the FBI. "

"No, no." Alana laughs, grinning as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ears. She's blushing slightly, and once more, Hannibal has to swallow back a smirk. "No, I'm not working for them. I'm just a guest lecturer."

"Never 'just' a guest lecturer." Hannibal tells her. "A teacher of future agents, chosen specifically from among the hundreds of psychiatrists in the country for your expertise. You should be proud, Alana."

"Really, Hannibal, I'm hardly an expert." She says, her blush deepening. "If anyone should be teaching here, it's you. Is …is that why you're here?" She asks, glancing at him curiously. "Are you giving a lecture?"

"I'm consulting on a profile. I'm supposed to be meeting Jack Crawford in his office to review his latest case."

Alana doesn't snort, exactly, but it's a very close thing. Interesting. "His office is down that hall and to the left." She says with a nod in its direction, lip curled slightly with disgust. "His name's on the door - you can't miss it."

"How is Jack?" Hannibal asks her airily, sensing pain behind her words and more than eager to dig in deeper. "He's been so busy with the Ripper, I've barely had the chance to speak to him in weeks." He hesitates, pitching his voice slightly so that he sounds concerned. "Has he come any closer to finding Will?"

"No." Alana tells him. There's something bitter in her tone. "He's been investigating this neurologist in Baltimore. He got an anonymous tip from a concerned citizen about him - seems convinced that he's involved somehow, despite the fact he can't find a single shred of evidence against him. The higher ups are getting impatient." She swallows thickly. "They're…they're planning on giving up, Hannibal. If Jack can't find Will by the end of the year, they're…they're going to declare him dead."

"But there's nothing that suggests he is." Hannibal points out.

"It doesn't matter." Alana says, and Hannibal is surprised by how angry she sounds. "The FBI allowed a trainee in the field and now he's missing. This is extremely embarrassing for them. They want it to go away. As fast as possible." She shakes her head, lip trembling slightly. "The whole thing is disgusting."

Hannibal cocks his head, studying her closely. "Did you know Will?" He asks her.

She nods tightly. "He was in a few of my classes." She says. It sounds like she's trying not to cry. "He was very bright. Very sweet." A single tear spills down her cheek. "It's such a shame."

Hannibal swallows back a sudden flare of jealousy at her words, at the thought of someone knowing a side of Will he doesn't. He nods slightly. "Very sad."

Alana heaves a sigh. "I have no idea where or how Jack Crawford found him," She says, wiping at her eyes. "But Will *never* should have even been here. Jack should *never* have

taken him out of the classroom before he was ready, and he should *never* have sent him after the Ripper alone. None of this should have happened."

"No, it shouldn't have." Hannibal agrees, and in this, at least, he's being honest. "I'm curious - why hasn't Jack received some sort of disciplinary action for what he's done? Surely, he should have faced an internal investigation. A suspension at the least…and yet, he's still head of the BAU, and from what I can tell, hasn't missed a single day of work since the day Will disappeared."

Alana makes the same disgusted noise as before. "There's a rumor floating around." She tells him. "Apparently, Jack made some kind of deal with the higher ups. About Will. I don't know what it was, but from what I understand, they can't burn Jack, because if they do, then they'll have to admit what they did, and that's the last thing that they want. So, Jack gets off without so much as a slap on the wrist, and Will gets swept under the rug and labeled as a cold case."

She shakes her head again.

"I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive Jack for what he's done, Hannibal." She says. "I certainly don't respect him or his judgment. Not anymore."

"Respect is like trust - it has to be earned." Hannibal says. "Forgiveness, on the other hand, is too great and difficult for just one person. It requires two. The betrayer and betrayed. It exists outside of our control. Perhaps one day, you'll find it in yourself to forgive Jack."

"I doubt it." Alana says. "What he's done…" She sighs. "I'm planning on holding a memorial." She says next. "For Will, if they can't find him. You, of course, are more than welcome to attend. From what Jack says, you made quite an impression on him before he disappeared."

"Did I?" Hannibal asks, lips quirking slightly. "I'm surprised - I thought he didn't much care for me when I met him."

“No, Jack says he’s never seen Will open up the way he did with you. Whatever you did… you were good for him. I think you…you really could have helped him, in a way no one else could have, if he…if he hadn’t…”

She trails off, voice and lip wobbling dangerously.

“Don’t lose hope, Alana.” Hannibal tells her quietly, wondering if words alone can draw blood. “We don't know that Will is dead, not yet. He might still turn up one day.”

“That’s precisely what I’m afraid of.” Alana murmurs, more to herself than to Hannibal. She then hefts the files she’s holding a little higher in her arms. “It was good to see you again, Hannibal, but I really need to be going - I have another lecture starting in ten minutes.”

“Of course, I understand.” He says, nodding graciously. “Please, don’t let me keep you. I should really be going myself, anyway - Jack’s expecting me, and I’d hate to keep him waiting.”

“Be careful, Hannibal.” Alana tells him, sounding slightly playful. “Whatever he says to you, don’t let him talk you into working in the field.”

“Never.” Hannibal assures her with a smirk. “Goodbye, Alana.”

“Bye, Hannibal.”

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True to Alana’s word, Hannibal finds Jack’s office at the end of the hall on the left, with his name spelled out in big, bold letters on the door.

“Come in.” His deep baritone booms when Hannibal knocks.

“Good afternoon, Jack.”

“Dr. Lecter!” Jack greets him warmly, rising from behind his desk to clasp his hand. “It’s good to see you again. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me on such short notice. Have a seat, please.”

“Thank you.” Hannibal says, sinking gracefully into his chair. He nods at the nearby bulletin board, which features a map of Maryland that’s studded with numerous colorful tacks, as well as several copies of police reports, various surveillance photos of Donald Sutcliffe, and one large color print of Will, scowling at the camera. “Any luck with Will?”

“None.” Jack tells him with a sigh. “We’ve been looking for weeks, and all we’ve managed to find is his car, abandoned in a public parking garage just a few blocks from Noble Hills Care Center.”

“The hospital where Donald Sutcliffe works.”

“Exactly.” Jack nods. “We tried checking the security cameras, but they were out - we don’t even know for sure what day, or even what *time* of day that Will arrived there.”

“But you still have the car.” Hannibal points out. “Surely, that should tell you something.”

Jack shakes his head. “I’ve had my team examine it three times and they can’t find a thing - no hair, no fibers, no prints, no trace evidence of any kind - not even Will’s. Someone wiped it down.”

Hannibal cocks an eyebrow at that. “If that’s the case, Jack, then there’s a good chance Will wasn’t even been taken from the garage at all. It’s likely that he met the Ripper somewhere else, and his car was moved there later.”

“That’s what we’re thinking.” Jack tells him. “Unfortunately, though, it’s the only thing we have to go on. I’ve been watching Donald Sutcliffe for weeks, but I can’t find any evidence against him.”

“If he is the Ripper, you won’t.”

“I know. That’s what I keep telling the higher ups, but they don’t want to hear it - they want results.” He heaves another sigh. “They think I’m wasting too much time and resources, looking for Will.” He says. “They’re convinced that if he really was taken by the Ripper, then it’s likely he’s already dead. To be honest, I can’t say I disagree.”

“But if that were the case, why hasn’t the Ripper displayed him?”

“That’s what I can’t figure out.” Jack frowns. “The Ripper only ever displays his kills in very public places, and always within a few hours of the time of death. If he did take Will, if he did kill him, we should have found him by now…so why haven’t we?”

Hannibal glances over at the picture of Will’s face. “Maybe the Ripper has other plans for him.” He muses quietly.

“Like what? Humiliating the FBI?”

Hannibal has to stop himself from smiling. “Perhaps.” He cocks his head. “Is it working?”

Jack snorts, “Oh, I’d say it’s working *real* well.” He says. “This whole thing has been nothing but a gigantic PR nightmare from the start - if I don’t catch Ripper soon, there’ll be rioting in the streets, I guarantee it.”

“Is that why you asked me to come in today?” Hannibal asks him. He’s getting irritated with Jack’s obsession with the Ripper, and what little regard he seems to have for Will. “Did you want to ask me more about Donald Sutcliffe?”

Jack laughs. “No, no.” He says. “No, I wanted your help building a profile for a new case we’re working on. Here.” He hands Hannibal a Manila file folder, inside of which are photographs of decomposing corpses lined in rows, their bodies swallowed up by mushrooms. “A group of teenage boys found them like that in Elk Neck State Forest in Maryland. Nine bodies total, all of them in various stages of decay. Buried in nutrient rich compost.”

Hannibal flips through the pictures with growing interest. “Buried alive?”

“With the intent of keeping them that way. At least, for a little while. Long enough for the fungus to eat away any distinguishing characteristics.”

Hannibal shows Jack one of the photographs from the stack. “What’s that?”

“Line and rebar. Used to administer intravenous fluids.”

“He was feeding them something.”

“Dextrose.” Jack tells him. “We found traces of it in all the catheters.”

“Force-feeding them sugar water?” Hannibal asks, passing the file back to Jack. “Or the mushrooms?”

“Both, as far as we can tell. Zeller thinks the killer might be targeting alcoholics. Something about the chemical reaction that occurs when you feed mushrooms dextrose.”

“An interesting theory.” Hannibal allows. “He may be on to something.”

Jack nods, then hesitates, however briefly. “We need to catch this guy, Dr. Lecter.” He says. “After everything that’s happened…the FBI really needs a win. I need a win.”

“Of course, Jack.” Hannibal tells him, and though his voice is smooth, internally, he can’t help but be disgusted. “I’m happy to help, in whatever way I can.”

“I appreciate that, Doctor, I really do. I know how busy you are.”

“Yes, I am.” Hannibal tells him, thoughts turning once more back to Will - the last time that he checked the webcam, he was curled up on his bed, his head pillowed on an open book. “In fact, I’m afraid I can’t stay too much longer, Jack - my next patient is at two, and it will take me a little more than an hour to make it back to Baltimore. I can only stay a few more minutes if I want to make it back on time.”

“Oh, yes, of course, Dr. Lecter. I understand.” Jack quickly tells him. “I’d hate to inconvenience you in any way. Here.” He says, offering Hannibal the file once again. “Take this with you. We can discuss it again tomorrow after you’ve had the chance to review it properly.”

“Thank you, Jack.” Hannibal says cheerfully, taking the file from him. He’s absolutely tickled at the fact that Jack is *begging* him for help, at the thought that he’ll be walking out of Quantico with classified, federal documents under his arm, all of which were freely given, practically shoved into his hands. The whole thing is hilarious, really. “I’m sure this will be a tremendous help...”

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When Hannibal arrives home, he finds Will waiting for him by his door like a puppy. Not that he’s surprised - he’s kept Will confined to his room for almost an entire week while he was still recovering from his illness, and the poor boy’s been begging him to let him for days. Hannibal had promised Will this morning before he left that if he behaved himself, he would. Clearly, he’s been waiting for him for a while - the look of relief on Will’s face when he sees Hannibal is enough to give him pause. For a brief moment, Hannibal thinks Will has actually missed him.

“Good evening, Will-”

“You’re gonna let me out, right?” Will blurts out anxiously as he all but throws himself in Hannibal’s arms. “I’ve been good, right?”

“Of course I’m going to let you out.” Hannibal assures him, looping his arm around Will’s waist and leading him toward the stairs. “You’ve been very good.”

Will sags against him with a sigh. He doesn’t even complain like he normally would when Hannibal insists on keeping his hand on the small of Will’s back as he guides him up the stairs.

“Are you hungry?” Hannibal asks, closing the basement door behind them. “I have a pot of bouillabaisse-”

But Will ignores him, striding quickly past Hannibal and disappearing from the room. Hannibal cocks his head, listening to the sound of his footsteps fading down the hall. While he doesn’t think Will would be so foolish as to try and make another escape attempt, Hannibal knows he shouldn’t disregard the possibility entirely - for all his knowledge and intrusion, he can never entirely predict what Will is going to do next at any given moment.

Rather than try now, he instead moves to his study, Jack’s file in his hand. Wherever Will’s gone, he can’t hear him anymore, no matter how hard he strains, and though Hannibal wonders where he is and what he’s doing, he pretends he’s unconcerned. He settles himself on the sofa in front of his fireplace, and flips the file open. Only the stiff line of his back betrays his true unease as he reviews the details of the case.

Unease unfounded, it would seem, when Will appears a minute later, a glass of whiskey in his hand. Hannibal cocks his eyebrow as Will sinks into the chair beside him.

“What? I’ve had a long day.”

“Will, dear, I thought I told you I didn’t want you drinking while you’re sick.”

Will looks him in the eye as he raises the glass to his lips. “Good thing I’m not still sick then.” He says before he takes a sip.

Hannibal sighs, shaking his head.

“Don’t worry.” Will tells him, holding out his other hand to show Hannibal the second glass of whiskey that he’s holding. “I got you one too.”

Hannibal blinks, surprised, and then chuckles as he accepts the glass that Will has brought him. Despite knowing that he should, Hannibal finds he can’t bring himself to scold Will for helping himself to the contents of his liquor cabinet - after everything the poor boy’s been through, he would say he’s more than earned it.

That, and Will just looks so damned pleased with himself and what he’s done that Hannibal knows it would be a waste of time and breath to even try and reprimand him now. So instead, he sips his whiskey, and then turns back to Jack’s file.

Beside him, Will squirms a little in his seat, craning his head to see what Hannibal is reading. “What’s that?”

Hannibal glances over at him. “This?” He asks, holding up the file. “Jack Crawford’s latest case. He’s asked me to help him build a profile.”

Will blinks at that. “Jack Crawford let you take that home?”

“Oh yes. In fact, he insisted on it.”

The expression on Will’s face is odd. If Hannibal had to guess, he thinks he feels betrayed. Left out. He’s quiet as Hannibal turns back to the report.

“Can…can I see?” He asks a moment later.

Hannibal looks up at him again. He’s a little surprised - he’s always been under the impression that Will doesn’t entirely enjoy profiling, that if given the choice, he’d rather not engage in it at all.

“Of course.” He says, holding out the file. He’s curious to see what Will is going to do.

Will takes the file from him and quickly flips it open. Hannibal sips his whiskey as he watches Will scan the photographs inside.

“What was the official cause of death?” He asks eventually.

“Kidney failure.” Hannibal tells him.

“They weren’t restrained?” Will asks, looking up at him. Hannibal shakes his head. Will bites his lip. “He was feeding them sugar water. Why?”

“Your colleague Zeller has a rather interesting hypothesis on that.” Hannibal tells him, swirling his drink. “He believes our killer might be targeting alcoholics. They crave sugar, and because they’re often insulin resistant, it takes longer for their bodies to break it down. The mushrooms can then utilize it for themselves, and in doing so, produce more alcohol. A vicious cycle, so to speak. In more ways than one.”

“But why mushrooms?” Will asks next, more to himself than to Hannibal.

Hannibal shrugs. “The structure of a fungus mirrors that of the human brain - an intricate web of connections.”

“So maybe he admires their ability to connect.” Will says slowly. “The way human minds can’t.”

“Yours can.” Hannibal reminds him, and grins a moment later when Will laughs.

“Yeah, but not *physically* .”

“Perhaps that’s what our killer’s looking for? Some sort of connection?”

“Maybe. But that still doesn’t explain how he’s choosing them.”

“You’re not satisfied with Zeller’s theory?”

Will frowns, shaking his head. “They all died of kidney failure...” He says, so softly that Hannibal almost doesn’t hear him. There’s a slight pause as Will considers what this means. “It’s not just *alcoholics* that have compromised endocrine systems.” He points out after a moment.

Hannibal straightens slightly in his seat. He knows what Will is getting at in an instant. “Death by diabetic ketoacidosis.” He says.

“He’s *inducing* diabetic comas.” Will says with a nod.

“Inducing them how?”

“He’s changing their medications.” Will says with conviction. “So he’s a doctor, or a pharmacist, or he works somewhere in medical services. Someone who would have access to their medical records, their prescriptions, their addresses.”

Hannibal smiles. “I’ll let Jack Crawford know when I meet with him tomorrow. I’m sure that he’ll appreciate your insight.”

Will scoffs at him. “I doubt you’ll give me any credit for it.” He says bitterly. Hannibal watches as he drains his glass.

“No, darling.” He agrees quietly. “Unfortunately, not.”

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Neither of them say a word to one another when Hannibal leads Will back to his room after dinner.

It’s only once they reach the door that the silence finally breaks.

“Goodnight, Will.” Hannibal says, holding the door open for him.

Will looks over at him.

“Goodnight, Hannibal.”

There’s something in the way he says it, and the way he’s looking at Hannibal when he says it, that nearly takes his breath away.

He hesitates - he doesn’t want to leave. He doesn’t want to say good night to Will just yet.

It takes him several moments to respond.

“Is there anything you need?”

Will shakes his head, gazing at him mournfully.

Hannibal has to stop himself from kissing him right then and there.

“Alright.” He says instead, slowly pulling the door shut behind him. “I’ll see you in the morning, Will.”

Will remains unmoving by the door, staring after him. He doesn’t speak until Hannibal is halfway to the stairs.

“W-wait.”

Hannibal jerks immediately (eagerly) around. “Yes, Will?”

Will bites his lip. “Can…can you stay?” He asks, his voice soft, unsure. “Please? Just for a little while? At least until I fall asleep?”

Hannibal smirks at him. “Darling boy, I’d stay the whole night, if you asked me to.”

“Would you? Really? If I asked?”

Hannibal cocks his head at him. “Do you want me to?”

Will looks absolutely miserable, his cheeks red and face crumpled with embarrassment. He nods.

Hannibal’s smile softens slightly. “Well, then. I suppose I will.”

Chapter End Notes

I know this wasn't the most exciting chapter - it's mostly filler/setting up for future chapters, but I promise the next one will be more fun.

Thank you for reading!

See you (hopefully) soon!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal passes Will's theory to Jack the next afternoon, who wastes no time compiling various lists of doctors' offices, pharmacies, and home health care services, cross-referencing the names he gathers with the victims they've managed to identify so far.

An arrest is made a few days later.

Jack is pleased - he says as much when he sees Hannibal again, and asks if he would be interested in helping him consult more in the future.

Hannibal is also pleased - the chance to profile for the FBI, to peek behind the curtain and manipulate their search for him, is far too great an opportunity to even think of passing up. Not to mention wildly funny. He tells Jack he would be delighted to help.

The only one who isn't pleased is Will. When Hannibal tells him the news, he grows quiet, staring at a spot between their two plates on the table.

"I'm tired." He says when Hannibal asks if he would like an after-dinner drink, then turns toward the basement and disappears into the gloom. Hannibal finds on his bed an hour later, curled into a loose fetal position and gazing blankly at the wall in front of him. His eyes are suspiciously red.

"Are you alright, Will?" Hannibal asks, setting a stack of freshly laundered clothes at the foot of his bed.

"Just peachy." Will croaks, refusing to look at him.

“Clearly.” Hannibal says, studying him. He waits a moment, and when Will remains silent and unmoving on the bed, he then asks. “Would you like to talk about what’s bothering you?”

“About the fact that I’m being held against my will by a cannibalistic serial killer who is now working with the very people who are trying to find me? Not really.”

“Why not?”

“What’s the point? It’s not like it will change anything.”

“You might feel better for it.”

Will scoffs at that. “Feel better?” He says, incredulous, as he turns to look at Hannibal directly. “I am *never* getting out of here.” He tells him. “I am never going to get away from you and you are *never* gonna let me go - you can’t. I will never be free again. I will never leave this room. I’m going to *die* here, trapped within these walls, either a month from now, a year from now, ten years from now, or whenever you finally get bored of me, and when I do, no one will even know I’m gone. And there is *nothing* I can do about it.” He shakes his head and rolls away once more. “There’s no feeling better about that.”

Hannibal is quiet for a moment. “I’m not going to get bored of you, Will.” He says at last, his voice soft.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do - there will never be anyone quite like you, darling.”

A small sound then - Hannibal’s not quite sure if it’s a gasp or a sob.

“Get out.”

“But, Will-”

“Just go.”

Hannibal nods and then slowly turns around. “Good night, sweetheart.” He says, before he leaves. “I understand how difficult this is for you, but please believe me when I say I only want what’s best for you. One day soon,” He promises, “You’ll see.”

Will doesn’t answer him. He just curls up tighter on himself.

+++

The sound of crying wakes him.

For one terrible, confused moment, Hannibal thinks he’s hearing Mischa, but then it all comes rushing back, and he remembers the baby monitor he has secured to the underside of Will’s bed.

He sits up, listening to the quiet, ragged breaths that filter through the little radio beside his bed. He hesitates, not sure what to do, or what the best way to approach this is. Should he leave Will be like he requested, and hope he feels better in the morning? Or should he approach him while he’s vulnerable, and risk Will’s wrath in doing so?

A single, broken sob decides the answer for him, and Hannibal wastes no time flipping back the covers of his bed before stealing silently from his room and down the stairs to the basement.

The sobs are louder now, not quite as tinny as they were over the monitor. Hannibal moves slowly to the bed, where Will is hunched around his pillow, fast asleep. He watches as Will’s shoulders shake and tears spill down his cheeks from eyes screwed tightly shut.

“Will.” He says, reaching out to lightly touch his face. “Will, wake up. Will-”

Will jerks awake with a gasp, looking up at Hannibal with wide and frightened eyes. Hannibal offers him a reassuring smile in response.

“You were having a nightmare, darling.” He whispers, and moves his fingers from Will’s dampened cheeks to his limply curling hair. “It’s alright. Everything’s alright. You’re safe. Shh.”

Will relaxes slightly, sinking back against the mattress with a sigh. His eyes close, but he doesn’t protest in the slightest as Hannibal continues to gently pat and soothe him.

Hannibal waits another moment before he finally breaks the silence. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Will shakes his head, lip trembling violently.

“Alright.” Hannibal says, knowing better than to push him. He cocks his head. “Do you want me to leave?”

Will hesitates, then shakes his head again, this time more firmly than before. Hannibal smiles to himself, and unlocks the railing that surrounds Will’s bed.

“Here.”

Will scoots back a little, making room, as Hannibal climbs up beside him on the bed. The moment that he settles down against the pillow, Will immediately lays his head against his chest. Hannibal blinks, surprised, then slowly wraps his arms around Will’s shoulders and pulls him even closer. Will fists his sweater tightly, shaking in his arms.

“I…I wanna go home.” Will whispers, his words so softly spoken that Hannibal almost doesn’t hear them. His breath hitches. “*I wanna go home*.”

Hannibal sighs.

“I know, sweetheart.” He tells him, pressing a quick kiss to Will’s forehead. “I’m sorry.”

And in a way, he is.

But mostly, he’s not sorry in the slightest.

Because Will is home already.

He just simply doesn’t know it yet.

+++

Weeks pass, and December comes slowly to a close.

Jack asks Hannibal to help consult on several cases, which he then takes home to Will, and together, they help Jack build profiles of the killers that he’s hunting. Almost half a dozen are taken into custody before the end of the year, and all because of them.

Christmas comes and goes, completely unacknowledged by them both.

They drink whiskey in the evenings, and discuss psychology and philosophy at length before retiring to Will’s bed. They fall asleep wrapped around each other’s arms, lulled by the quiet rhythm of their breathing.

And on January 2nd, Will Graham goes from being considered as merely missing by the FBI to being quietly, officially, declared as being dead.

In response to this, Freddie Lounds writes a rather scathing article for TattleCrime, questioning Jack's competence as head of the BAU and advising all incoming recruits to seriously reconsider a future with the FBI, given poor Will's fate.

True to her word, Alana arranges a memorial for Will a few days later, and Hannibal offers to host a dinner in his honor following the service.

The morning of, Hannibal wakes to find Will pressed against him - fast asleep and hard. He doesn't move, he merely watches, fascinated, as Will's eyes flick back and forth beneath his lids, hips rolling urgently against him. It's only when he breathes a quiet, desperate moan that Hannibal finally pulls back, pushing his spare pillow down between Will's legs before slipping quietly away.

Because Hannibal is well aware of just how vulnerable Will is with him. Will's life, his sanity, are quite literally in his hands, and his hands are anything but merciful. There isn't anything that Hannibal can't do to him, and while he has no qualms with drugging him or forcing him to eat, there are some lines he absolutely will not cross so long as Will is in his care.

Because Hannibal takes his role as Will's protector seriously - the boy is over twenty years his younger, after all, and (as far as Hannibal is concerned) still very much a child. Everything he's done from the moment that they met, he's done for Will and his well being. The thought of Will being taken advantage of by anybody, especially by him and especially in a situation such as theirs, when the power dynamic is so remarkably skewed, is simply unacceptable. The last thing Hannibal wants is for Will to be manipulated into a relationship he might not normally want, or feel exploited in some way, however inadvertently. It's why he's been so careful with him since the day he brought him home.

Rather than risk such an overstep now, Hannibal instead spends several hours in the kitchen, preparing for the dinner he's providing later on that night. He gives Will plenty of time to wake up and compose himself, and it's only once the early morning has progressed to early afternoon that he descends the basement stairs once more.

Maybe he's imagining it, but it seems Will's cheeks flare very slightly pink when he catches sight of Hannibal.

"Good morning, Will." Hannibal says, handing Will his breakfast tray. "I hope you're hungry."

Will nods, and dips his spoon into the oatmeal that he's brought. Hannibal waits patiently until he's finished before he speaks again.

"Come with me, Will."

Will doesn't seem to think much of the request, and follows obediently behind him. They don't go far - Hannibal comes to a stop just a few feet from Will's cell door, and gestures to the stainless steel operating table that sits prepped and waiting, draped with sterile sheets.

"Lie down."

Will hesitates, glancing nervously at Hannibal, who nods.

"Please, Will." He says, his tone warm. "I insist."

Will bites his lip and climbs atop the operating table, before lowering himself carefully down. He lies shivering on the cold and unforgiving metal, blinking fearfully at Hannibal, who takes his hand in his.

"Have you ever given blood before, Will?" He asks, caressing the blue vein that runs along his forearm.

Will shakes his head. “I-I tried once.” He says. “But they wouldn’t let me. They said I was too skinny.”

Hannibal hums. “I’m not surprised. You were dreadfully malnourished when I brought you here. There’s still a chance you might faint now even with the weight you’ve gained.”

He turns away, and grabs the tray that he prepared the night before - gloves, tourniquet, alcohol pads, needle, tubing, collection bag, and bandages are lined in neat, clean rows, ready to be used. Will swallows audibly at the sight.

“What…why are you taking my blood?” He asks, his voice a little higher than its normal pitch, and Hannibal has to stop himself from cooing - the boy’s afraid, but even so, he’s trying to be brave.

“I’m hosting a dinner party tonight.” Hannibal informs him, snapping on his gloves. “For dessert, I was thinking of serving Sanguinaccio Dolce, a kind of chocolate pudding made traditionally from pig’s blood.” He straightens one of the gloves, and smiles down at Will. “Just imagine how much sweeter it will taste if I use yours instead.”

Will blinks at him, frowning slightly, as Hannibal holds out his hand.

“Your arm, Will.”

Will looks from Hannibal’s waiting hand to his expression, and back again. For a moment, Hannibal thinks he’s going to refuse, and his fingers inch to the sedative he has stored inside his pocket. But then, to his surprise, Will quietly does as he’s asked, and lays his arm in Hannibal’s outstretched hand. He looks pointedly away when Hannibal ties the tourniquet above his elbow, and jumps when he brushes at the skin with an alcohol wipe, his chest heaving fitfully.

“No pain.” Hannibal promises as he slips the needle carefully inside the swollen, waiting vein. Will doesn’t even flinch, but he does whimper a moment later when he glances over and sees his blood collecting in the bag laid at his side. Hannibal threads his fingers through his hair. “Don’t look, darling.” He says. “It will all be over soon.”

Will nods tightly, and keeps his head turned to the side as the collection bag begins to slowly fill. Hannibal continues to card his fingers through his hair, singing softly as he does.

" *Fais dodo, piti so mama, fais dodo, piti so mama* ," He croons, and Will relaxes slightly on the table. The Cajun dialect is a little different from the one he's used to, and he's sure that his pronunciation is more than slightly off, but even so, it seems that Will can understand him fine. " *Si bébé pas fais dodo, charette a mouton vini mangé li* ."

Will sighs, shaking slightly where he lays. He's paler than he was before, his cheeks and lips no longer rosy pink but white, his eyes fluttering weakly as the blood drains from his arm. He barely even stirs when Hannibal finally pulls the needle free a moment later.

"Thank you for humoring me." Hannibal says, sealing the bag shut. "How are you feeling?"

Will swallows thickly. "I…I don't feel so good." He confesses.

"Are you nauseous?"

Will keeps his eyes shut as he slowly shakes his head. "Just dizzy."

"That would be your blood sugar." Hannibal tells him, reaching for the second item that he stashed the night before. "It's quite common for it to drop when giving blood. Stay down." He says when Will raises his head a couple inches off the table. "If you sit up too quickly, you could faint. We need to get your blood sugar back up before you try. Here, Will - drink some apple juice."

Will blinks, glaring at the sippy cup that Hannibal holds out for him.

"You're not nearly as funny as you think you are." He snaps, refusing to take it.

“Oh, come now, Will.” Hannibal says cheerfully, beaming at him. The cup is blue, with happy, cartoon fishes printed all along the sides. “I bought this specifically with you in mind. I thought you’d like it.”

“I’m not using that.”

“Will, we need to get your blood sugar back up or else you’ll faint. The fastest way for us to do that is for you to drink the juice. Using a spill-proof cup will allow you to drink without needing to sit up.”

“No.”

“Come on, darling, just try it.” Hannibal says as he brings the cup to nudge against Will’s lips. “I promise you’ll feel better once you do.”

Will heaves another sigh, and then raises shaking arms to take the cup at last. Hannibal steadies him as he slips the spout inside his mouth.

“Slowly.” Hannibal tells him, watching closely as Will swallows. He waits until he’s sure that Will won’t choke before he lets him go. “Good boy.”

He’s pleased when Will regains a little of the color that he’s lost, and loops a steady hand around his wrist to quickly check his pulse. It’s a weak, fluttering little thing, and Hannibal frowns, convinced that Will is going to pass out if he's not careful, but before he can warn him, Will suddenly blurts out, “Who’s coming for dinner?”

Hannibal glances at his face. He somehow looks even more suspicious than he sounds. “Jack.” He tells him. “Dr. Bloom. And a couple other of your colleagues.”

Will frowns at that. “Why?”

Hannibal hesitates. “Because yesterday, the FBI declared that you were dead.”

Whatever color Will has gained is immediately lost again. “What?” He breathes, staring wide-eyed up at Hannibal.

“Dr. Bloom is holding a memorial service for you later this afternoon.” Hannibal goes on to tell him, ignoring Will’s horrified expression. “I offered to host a dinner party afterwards.”

Will’s quiet for a moment. “You’re bringing them back here.” He says at last, the words drawn out and low as he slowly pushes himself upright on the table. “Feeding them my blood. Knowing that they think I’m dead…when I’m literally right under their feet.”

Hannibal doesn’t speak, he just eyes him warily, convinced he’s going to have to catch him any moment.

Will heaves a shuddering breath, swaying slightly where he sits.

“I know you think you’re being funny.” He says, his voice soft. “But you’re really, *really* , not.”

“On the contrary,” Hannibal says slowly. “I think the whole thing is tremendously funny.”

“What, mocking the FBI?”

“Yes.”

“And taunting me as well. Is that funny?”

Hannibal frowns. “I’m not taunting you, Will.” He says quietly.

“No? So inviting the same people who were trying to find me to your house, knowing that they’ve given up on me and dangling my only chance of freedom just outside my reach… that’s not something that amuses you?”

“No.” Hannibal says firmly.

“Please.” Will scoffs. He’s shaking more than he was before. “You’re a sadist. You enjoy every minute of watching me suffer.”

“I don’t enjoy the thought of hurting you that way, Will.”

“ *No, don’t lie to me* !” Will cries, scrambling quickly to his feet and trying to claw at Hannibal’s dark eyes.

But the moment that Will’s fully upright on his feet, his eyes roll back inside his head, and he collapses with a gasp. Hannibal quickly grabs him before he hits the ground, and hoists him up into his arms.

Will moans as Hannibal carries him back into his room. “No!” He sobs when Hannibal lays him on his bed. “No, no!”

“That’s enough excitement for one day.” Hannibal says quietly, pressing a quick kiss against his brow before taking the sedative from his pocket. “It’s time for you to sleep now, Will.”

“No, please-”

“Shh.” Hannibal says, slipping the needle painlessly into Will’s limp and shaking arm. “It’s alright. I’ll be right here waiting for you when you wake up.”

Will's eyes flutter shut, and Hannibal waits until his breathing slows before he finally turns away.

+++

The ceremony that Alana plans is lovely, and takes place in the Academy's small chapel. There are flowers on the altar, and a picture of Will, smiling shyly at the camera. Hannibal wonders where she got it as he sits in the front row beside a haggard-looking Jack, watching as Will's classmates file through the door. They're somber, and sit stiff and silent in their uniforms as they pay him their respects. Their instructors are beside them, pale and shaken, along with several people from the FBI's forensics department. Frederick Chilton is also there, for some strange reason, looking irritatingly smug and haughty amidst the sea of tight, drawn faces. Hannibal scans the crowd with a keen eye, but does not see anyone from any other department besides the BAU.

Once everyone has taken their seats, Jack then rises to his feet and moves to the front of the room. He stands tall behind the lectern in his best black suit, reading glasses perched at the end of his nose as he looks around the chapel.

"Fidelity, bravery, and integrity." He says. "These are the core values of the FBI, the code by which we live our lives each day. Will Graham exemplified these virtues better than anyone I ever knew or met. He was dedicated, devoted, and courageous to a fault. His sacrifice was not in vain, nor will it be forgotten - each and every one of us owes this much to Will and more."

Such pretty words he speaks, and yet the fact that it was Jack who sent Will to his death only cheapens their effect.

+++

"No, *no* !" Alana says, blushing furiously. "Will did *not* have a *crush* on me!"

"He did! He totally did!" Beverly insists, grinning at her from across the table. Beside her, Hannibal sits silent, blind with jealous rage and barely holding it together. "It was so sweet,

seeing him follow you around - like puppy love! And you know, now that I think about it, I don't seem to recall you doing anything to try and stop him either, Alana."

"I had a professional curiosity about Will, nothing more."

"Hard not to." Frederick Chilton suddenly butts in, swirling his wine. "He was so lucid. So perceptive. Not to mention quite the topic of conversation in the psychiatric circles - just imagine what having the chance to study him would have done for your career. I can't believe that in all those weeks you had access to him, you never once tried to test him. Makes one wonder why."

"Probably because I just wanted everyone to leave him alone." Alana says, a little sharply. "The last thing that Will needed was someone fumbling with his head."

"And remind me again what leaving him alone got him?"

"Alright." Jack booms from the other end of the table. "I think it's fair to say that when it comes to Will, we all have some regrets. But arguing about what we could have done differently won't bring him back."

"I agree." Hannibal says firmly. "This is not the time to mourn for past mistakes. We're here to celebrate Will's life and hope that he's at peace, not indulge in petty grievances with one another."

"Hear, hear!" Jimmy Price cries out, a little more than slightly drunk and swaying where he sits. "Well said!"

"To Will!" Beverly calls, holding up her glass of wine. "The best that ever was!"

"To Will!"

“Will!”

Hannibal watches as they toast Will’s name and memory, their eyes bright with unshed tears, and can’t help but feel disgusted by them all, at the fact that none of them knew what they had with Will and that each and every one of them failed him in some way. None of them deserved him. The proof of that is in the pudding, when Hannibal serves it to them later. He listens to them moan around their spoons, exclaiming at the taste, and never once realizing that what they're so convinced is gone is now sitting on their tongues and very much alive beneath their feet.

+++

Later, after everyone has left, Hannibal goes back downstairs to check on Will once more, a bowl of soup in hand.

He finds him where he left him - fast asleep atop his bed, dark curls fanned across his pillow and pink lips slightly parted. Hannibal sets the soup aside and approaches the bed slowly, awed by what he sees.

He truly is breathtaking - Botticelli himself could not have envisioned an Angel lovelier than Will, and Hannibal would gladly spend the remainder of his life upon his knees in worship if it meant he’d see him every day like this forever.

He unlocks the railing of Will’s bed and then carefully lowers himself down to sit beside him on the mattress, trying not to wake him. The sedative he gave him should be starting to wear off, and Hannibal has missed Will terribly while he’s been away. He gazes down into his sleeping face adoringly, and then slowly lifts his hand to cup his cheek.

“Will.” He murmurs softly, thumb stroking back and forth across his skin. “Will, wake up.”

Will stirs a little, mumbling under his breath. It takes him a few tries to open his eyes, and when he does, his gaze is foggy and unfocused. He blinks slowly up at Hannibal several times before he seems to realize who he is.

“You..no.” He slurs, weakly shaking his head. “Go ‘way. Go away, I’m mad at you.”

“Are you?” Hannibal asks, amused, as he moves to pet Will’s hair. “That’s alright, darling, you have every right to be. I left you alone for so terribly long, didn’t I?”

“N-ngh!” Will whines, batting clumsily at his hands. “You *stole* me!”

“I did.” Hannibal admits, completely unapologetic of this fact. If anything, he’s proud.

“You..an’...an’ you shot me, you… *you left me* !” Will wails. “You left me!”

“Oh, Will.” Hannibal sighs. “Shh. It’s alright - I’m never going to leave you again, sweetheart, I promise.”

“No, want…I want Jack! Jack and…and ‘Lana! Not you!” Will’s face screws up then, like he’s trying not to cry. “I wan’…p-popsicles!” He hiccups, sounding nothing short of heartbroken at the fact he doesn’t have them.

“How about some soup?” Hannibal asks him kindly, heart bursting at its seams with adoration for the boy.

“No!” Will sobs, shaking his head. “Don’t…not it!”

“Shh.” Hannibal coos as he gently props him upright. “You’re tired, darling. You don’t know what you want. It’s alright. Let’s get you fed, and then you can go back to sleep.”

“Jack!” Will calls, slumped against his pillows as Hannibal retrieves his dinner. “‘M here! H-Help! Don’t leave me! Jack!”

“Jack’s not here, Will.” Hannibal tells him, sitting down beside him once again. “I’m afraid that he can’t hear you.”

Will chokes around a sob. “J-Jack!” He croaks, tears streaming down his face.

“Nevermind.” Hannibal tells him, scooping a bit of broth onto the spoon. “It’s time to eat now, dear. You can try and call Jack the next time that he’s here. Alright?”

Will nods a little. “‘Kay.” He sniffs.

“Good boy.” Hannibal says, smiling at him. “Here we are, Will. Open up.”

He only manages to feed Will a few spoonfuls before he turns his head away. “Soup is’t very good.” He slurs, blinking slowly.

Hannibal chuckles. “I’m sorry, Will.” He says, setting the bowl aside. “One of the side effects of the medication I gave you is a metallic aftertaste. It should wear off soon.”

“I don’t like it.” Will whines. His lip wobbles dangerously. “And I don't like you!”

Hannibal smiles - the beauty of an Angel and the meanness of an imp. He could not have dreamed a more perfect creature if he tried.

“I know.” He tells Will, leaning down to kiss his forehead once again. “Let’s get you settled for bed. I’m sure that you’ll feel better in the morning.”

Will sputters and whines the entire time that Hannibal cleans his face, squirming as he wipes away the tear tracks on his cheeks.

“No!” He says, trying to turn away. “Stoppit! Lemme-no! *Sonova* -”

“All done.” Hannibal tells him, setting the washcloth aside. “Come on, let’s get you to the toilet-”

“No!”

“Would you prefer a diaper?” Hannibal asks him patiently.

“ *No* !”

“Then let’s go.”

Will can barely hold his head up as Hannibal lifts him to his feet and over to the toilet, feet stumbling and dragging the entire way. Hannibal has seen newborn fawns more coordinated than Will is at the moment, and he doesn’t trust the boy to stand alone without collapsing to the ground. Rather than risk it, he instead lowers Will down onto the seat, instructing him to go this way instead. Will grumbles under his breath at what Hannibal can only assume is the fact that he’s been maneuvered into a more effeminate position, but ultimately does as he’s commanded, clinging tight to Hannibal’s legs to stop himself from tipping over. When he’s done, Hannibal then helps him back to bed, Will cursing the entire time.

“There we go.” Hannibal says at last, tucking Will beneath his sheets. “Are you warm enough?”

Will nods, fighting hard to stay awake. Hannibal can’t help but smile at him fondly.

“Is there anything you need, Will?”

Will frowns, blinking up at him. His eyes are like fog rolling over the sea - hazy and blue.

“Iz there anything *you* need?” He asks eventually.

“Not that I can think of.” Hannibal tells him, amused.

Will considers this for a moment.

“Do you wanna kiss me?” He then asks, words thick and running close together.

Hannibal cocks his head, frowning.

“I’m sorry?”

“You look like you want to.” Will mumbles, eyes slipping briefly shut. “D-do you?”

Hannibal hesitates.

“Very much.” He whispers, reverent, as he reaches out to gently brush a stray curl from Will’s brow. Will frowns, eyes dulled by his exhaustion. Hannibal swallows thickly. “Would you like me to?”

Will’s frown deepens, and several agonizing seconds pass before he finally speaks again.

“I…I don’t know.” He breathes at last, confused, as he drifts gently off to sleep.

Hannibal smiles sadly, gazing down at him. He waits until Will's breathing slows and then leans down to kiss his cheek.

"Let me know the moment that you do, my love." He begs him quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> TW for violence towards the end of the chapter. I don't think it's too graphic, but please be aware that it's coming.
>
> This chapter represents a major turning point in Will and Hannibal's dynamic - I'm so excited to share it with you and I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Will wakes, it’s very early, or at least, he thinks it’s very early - Hannibal still has not provided him with a watch or clock to judge the time of day, and the only way Will has to measure time at all is by their daily interactions and occasional, brief trips upstairs. But still, he’s fairly sure it’s early, because Hannibal has not come down with breakfast for him yet, and when it comes to all things food and Will related, he’s never been neglectful. If past experience is anything to go on, Will is sure that he’ll be down eventually, and most likely sooner rather than later.

With this in mind, Will shoves his blankets aside and then slowly pushes himself to his feet with a groan. His legs are shaking underneath him as he stumbles over to the sink, and his head feels as though it has been packed with cotton. Whatever Hannibal gave him yesterday, it’s still clearly in his system, and no doubt very strong - Will struggles just to stay upright as he splashes water on his face, trying to wake himself up, and it barely does a thing. Even rinsing out his mouth does little for the awful taste that sits so heavy on his tongue.

He swallows thickly, eyes hot with unshed, frustrated tears, and then turns and hauls himself across the room and over toward his closet. It takes him twice as long to dress himself as it normally would, and when Hannibal finally does arrive not long after, he finds Will sitting on his bed, his back turned to the door.

“Good morning, Will.” He says brightly, Will’s breakfast tray in hand. “How did you sleep?”

“Like someone drugged out of their mind, thank you very much.” Will answers flatly, refusing to look at him.

“I take it you’re still mad at me, then.”

“Wow, I can see why Jack Crawford wanted your help so badly - you’re like a detective or something.”

Behind him, Hannibal sighs.

“You were very upset yesterday, Will.” He says softly, setting the tray at the end of Will’s bed. “It was important that you calmed down-”

“Oh, don’t talk to me like I’m four.” Will snaps, voice shaking slightly. “And don’t act like you were doing me any favors with what you did, either. It wasn’t about helping me - you did it because you wanted to, that’s all.”

“I was only doing what I thought was best for you, Will.”

“Yeah, that’s what you always say.” Will snarls at him, gripping his sheets with white-knuckled rage. “But you know, for some reason, I just don’t believe it.”

Hannibal clicks his tongue. “Will-”

“Leave me alone.”

“Not until you’ve had your breakfast.” Hannibal says firmly. “You haven’t eaten a full meal since yesterday-”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Will.” Hannibal says, ignoring him. “Eat, darling.”

“No.”

“Will. You know what will happen if you don’t.”

Very slowly, Will turns to look at him at last. He glares at him, lip wobbling dangerously.

“I don’t care!” He spits, trying hard to hold back tears. “You can threaten me as much as you like. Do whatever you want to me, Hannibal - I don’t care anymore!”

Hannibal cocks his head, studying him. With a sniff, Will turns his back to him again.

“Just do it.” He says, tears spilling down his cheeks at last. “Just force the tube down my fucking throat like you did last time and then leave me the hell alone.”

“But, Will, you’re crying-”

“So what? That’s never stopped you before. So why should it start now?”

Will waits, expecting Hannibal to grab him, or at the very least, to make his way over to the rolling cart to prepare another sedative, but to his surprise, the man does neither. Instead, Hannibal lifts the breakfast tray back up, and then he slowly turns around and leaves without a word.

Will glances over his shoulder, wondering just what he’s going to do and knowing that he’s capable of anything. Feeling suddenly sick, Will lays his aching head against his pillow and curls up on his side, forcing himself to take several deep breaths.

He’s endured the discomfort and humiliation of a feeding tube before. He can do it again.

He just really, *really* doesn’t want to.

Hannibal returns a few minutes later, and Will tenses when he hears his room door open. He swallows, his throat dry, as Hannibal moves slowly toward him, and jumps a moment later when he feels Hannibal lightly touch his shoulder.

“Will, sit up.” He tells him, his voice gentle, and Will hears him set something on the bed. It crinkles loudly when he lets it go, like the paper packaging the feeding tubes come in, and Will can’t help but tremble at the sound. “Come on, now, sit - oh, Will. Shh. It’s alright. You’re alright, sweetheart. Shh.”

Will sobs, terrified, as Hannibal lifts him carefully up.

“Shh.” Hannibal shushes him, thumbs swiping lightly back and forth across his cheeks. “Everything’s alright.”

“Just do it!” Will sobs, shaking violently. “Just get it over with! G-go on!”

“I’m not placing another feeding tube, Will.” Hannibal sighs, pressing a quick kiss to the side of Will’s head. “I’m not going to do that to you, sweetheart.”

“Why not?” Will sniffs bitterly. “It’s not like you haven’t already.”

“I know.” Hannibal says, nuzzling him. “How about a compromise instead?”

Will stiffens slightly at that. “What do you mean?” He asks nervously.

“Would you like a popsicle?”

Will blinks. Of everything he’s expecting Hannibal to say, that’s pretty much the last thing he ever thought he’d hear. “W-what?”

“A popsicle.” Hannibal repeats, and when Will turns his head, he sees a blood-red popsicle encased in plastic wrapping in his hand. “You told me last night you wanted one. Would you still like one?”

Will hesitates. Truthfully, he’s been craving popsicles for quite some time now, and with his inhibitions as lowered as they no doubt were last night, he wouldn’t be the least surprised if he had said so at some point.

What does surprise him is the fact that Hannibal actually has them.

He fiddles with a loose thread on his sheets, sneaking glances at the popsicle that Hannibal is holding. “I don’t remember that.” He mumbles at last, blushing slightly at his childish request.

“Yes, you were quite devastated that I didn’t have any at the time.” Hannibal tells him, and Will can feel the blood rushing, pooling under his cheeks. He wonders, vaguely, just what else he said, and decides he’s probably better off not knowing.

Hannibal smiles at him fondly.

“Have one, darling.” He says, his voice soft, encouraging. “There’s a whole box just for you if you want more.”

Will takes the popsicle at last, too mortified to meet his gaze, but his fingers are shaking so badly that Hannibal has to take it back and open it for him.

“There we are.” Hannibal says, handing him the frozen treat once more. “Enjoy.”

Will slips it quickly in his mouth, and suddenly, he’s eight years old again, watching Fourth of July fireworks explode over the piers in Biloxi, a cherry popsicle melting in his hand.

He swallows back tears, wondering just what he did so wrong in life to possibly end up here, and stares down at his feet as they dangle just a couple inches off the ground. Beside him, Hannibal is watching closely.

“I would like you to try and eat a little more than just a popsicle, Will.” He tells him, his voice soft. “Can you do that for me?”

Will bites his lip. “I’m really not that hungry.” He mumbles, squirming slightly where he sits.

“Can you please try?” Hannibal asks, looping his arm around Will’s shoulders and squeezing him gently. “I’ll make you whatever you want, sweetheart, but I need you to try and cooperate with me. It’s important that you eat.”

Will heaves a sigh and then slowly nods his head.

“Good boy.” Hannibal says, cupping the side of Will’s head in his hand and pulling him close to kiss his temple. “What would you like, darling?”

“I…I don’t know.”

“There must be something that you want, Will.” Hannibal says, stroking at his hair. “What about another protein scramble? Hmm? You like that.”

“Sure.” Will says without enthusiasm. From the corner of his eye, he can see Hannibal cock his head.

“Will, dear,” He asks in that same gentle tone as before. “What’s wrong?”

“You know what’s wrong.”

“I know that you don’t want to be here.” Hannibal tells him. “That’s nothing new. But what I don’t understand is why you’re so upset now. Is this because of the dinner party last night?”

Rather than answer, Will asks a question of his own. “What do you *want* from me, Hannibal?” He asks, miserable. “What is it exactly you’re getting out of this? Why do you insist on keeping me around?”

“I told you, Will. I only want what’s best for you.”

“And what is that, exactly?”

“For you to embrace what you really are.” Hannibal tells him simply. “To revel in it. For you to live your life without the constant fear of knowing what you’re capable of.”

“You want me to be like you. A killer.”

“I want you to be yourself, Will.”

“And what about what *I* want?” Will asks him, voice trembling again. “Don’t I get any say in this?”

“At some point, Will.” Hannibal tells him, sounding sad. “Someone told you that what you truly are is something to be ashamed of. That you needed to be something else entirely. And - because you were no doubt very young and had no one else to tell you otherwise - you believed them. And you’ve spent every moment since trying to force yourself to be

something that you're not. What you're doing isn't helping actually anything, sweetheart - all you're doing is hurting yourself."

"Well, maybe I'm just fine with that." Will tells him, glaring at his toes again.

"Well, maybe I'm not."

Will heaves a sigh. "And what exactly do you get out of this?" He asks him flatly. "The satisfaction of knowing you were right all along?"

"A friend." Hannibal says simply, much to Will's surprise.

He blinks. And then he scoffs - he's not quite sure that he believes him.

He's not quite sure he can believe that anyone would *want* to be his friend.

"Alright." He says, rolling his eyes. "Sure. Why not? And what would happen then? If you got what you wanted? What do you think we would do?"

Beside him, Hannibal is quiet.

Will laughs mirthlessly.

"I assume not much would change for you." He says bitterly. "For you, life will still be light, and air, and color. The same as it has always been." He shakes his head. "But my life will never be anything ever again except these four walls." He says quietly. "You saw to that the moment that you took me."

It’s Hannibal’s turn to sigh. “I can’t let you out, Will.” He says. He sounds regretful. “You know I can’t. And why.”

Will shakes his head and swipes impatiently at his eyes. “That’s your fault, not mine.” He croaks.

“Perhaps.” Hannibal agrees with a shrug. “But be that as it may, sweet boy, it doesn’t change the fact that I still expect you to eat.”

Will bites his lip. He’s quiet as Hannibal rises slowly to his feet.

“I’m going to bring you your breakfast now, Will.” Hannibal tells him, leaning down to kiss the crown of his head. “I want you to try and eat as much of it as you can. Alright?”

“And what will happen if I don’t?” Will asks warily.

“Then I’m afraid you won’t get your present.”

Will looks sharply up at that. “What present?”

Hannibal smirks back at him, lip hooked over his crooked incisor. “That’s a surprise, dear.” He says, tapping Will affectionately on the nose before he turns and walks away. “If you eat everything I bring you today,” He calls over his shoulder, “I promise that you won’t regret it.”

Will stares silently after him as he disappears into the basement’s shadows, frowning slightly.

He’s not so naive as to think that whatever Hannibal is planning is anything but good.

But even so, a part of him still can't help but be intrigued.

+++

Despite himself, Will does as Hannibal requests, much to his delight.

"Well done, Will." He beams as he lifts away his empty plate at lunch. "You've eaten everything I've brought you. I'm proud of you, sweet boy."

"Do I get my reward now?"

"Tonight at dinner." Hannibal tells him with a chuckle. "I'm afraid you'll have to be patient for just a little while longer, darling, but I promise it will all be worth it in the end."

"What is it?"

"You'll see."

Will huffs and flops unhappily against his bed, glaring at Hannibal's retreating back.

He does not appear again until a couple hours later, a garment bag in hand.

"Put this on, please." He tells Will, holding out the bag for him to take.

Will peeks cautiously inside, and can't help but feel a stab of disappointment at what he finds.

“My present is a suit?” He asks, lifting it up out of the bag. In fairness to Hannibal, it’s a beautiful piece, handsomely cut and expertly tailored, but even so, it’s not what he was expecting.

“Hardly.” Hannibal says, brushing lightly at the deep blue fabric. He sounds amused. “This is more my gift to myself than anything else. I’d like for you to wear it tonight at dinner.”

“Why?” Will asks, confused. “Are we going somewhere?”

“Not tonight, dear. Tonight, we have a guest.”

Will stiffens instantly at that. “A guest?” He echoes warily. “Who?”

“That’s your surprise, Will.” Hannibal tells him with a wink before nodding at the suit. “Put it on. I think that you’ll look very handsome in it.”

Will heaves a sigh, and strips down to his boxers. Hannibal watches raptly as he then pulls on first the pants and then his shirt, head cocked slightly to the side. It’s only when Will moves to tie his tie that he suddenly stands up.

“Allow me.” He murmurs softly, taking the slip of silk between his hands. Will holds his breath as he wraps it slowly, almost reverently, around his neck.

“There.” He says at last before he dips his head to lay a kiss against the pulse point of Will’s throat. He then reaches for the jacket, and helps Will slip it on. “Beautiful, Will.” He tells him, brushing lightly at his shoulders. He then steps back, eyes soft as he watches Will pull on his shoes. “Shall we go?” He asks, holding out his hand. “Our guest is waiting.”

Will hesitates, then takes his offered hand. Hannibal’s smile widens as he leads Will from his room and up the basement steps.

There's music playing in the kitchen. It echoes softly down the darkened hall as Hannibal guides Will to the dining room. When they reach it, Will comes abruptly to a stop - a lavish meal is spread across the table, all flowers and spread ribs, and sitting at the place of honor is an older man he's never met. They blink at one another, then glance quizzically at Hannibal.

He beams.

"It would seem I was worried for nothing, Richard." He says. "Will is going to be joining us for dinner, after all."

"Oh, that's wonderful." The old man says, with a smile that seems forced. It feels more awkward than hostile, though. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

The last part he directs at Will, who frowns, wondering if he's missed something. He shoots Hannibal a questioning look over his shoulder, and Hannibal smiles back at him serenely.

"Richard Tierney is a patient of mine, Will." He says as he begins to gently stroke Will's back. "He recently moved back to Baltimore after being… *away* for several years, and is still getting reacquainted with the area. I thought we might enjoy having him for dinner, but given how unwell you were last night, I wasn't sure that you'd be joining us tonight."

And at that, Will is instantly suspicious. He's pretty sure he knows what's going to happen next - Hannibal is going to kill this poor bastard, and most likely for barely any reason at all. The Ripper's victims are always those that he considers rude, and Hannibal is nothing if not petty. Whether Richard Tierney's crime is a single, thoughtless comment or cutting someone off in traffic is anybody's guess, but whatever it is, Will highly doubts it's bad enough to merit death.

He glares at Hannibal, who answers with a smirk.

"Shall we sit?" He asks, nudging Will further in the room. "The food is getting cold."

“God forbid.” Will mutters as he sinks into his seat. Tierney’s eyes flick anxiously toward Will, but Hannibal ignores his snide remark.

“Hangtown Fry.” He says, uncovering one of the dishes and setting it down in front of Tierney. “An omelet invented during the California Gold Rush, made from frying eggs, bacon, and oysters together.”

“Breakfast for dinner?” Will asks him with a slight sarcastic edge as Hannibal turns and passes him his plate.

Hannibal winks at him again. He seems positively giddy. “Enjoy.” He says before he sits and serves himself. He waits until both Will and Tierney have taken a bite before he scoops a bit of egg onto his fork.

“Mmm.” Tierney hums, eyes closing blissfully as he savors his meal. “That’s the first oyster I’ve had in fifteen years.” He says. “You have no idea just how much I’ve missed them.”

“Considering how long you’ve waited, I hope that mine don’t disappoint.”

“Not at all.” Tierney quickly reassures him. “It’s perhaps the best I’ve ever had!”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Hannibal tells him with a smirk, spearing a bit of oyster for himself. “For a Chesapeake Bay native like yourself, I would argue that depriving you of such a delicacy is both unusual and cruel.”

Tierney laughs. “I would certainly say so. But then again, I’m biased.”

“Sorry.” Will blurts out, confused, as he looks back and forth between them. “But where exactly were you for the past fifteen years that you couldn’t get oysters?”

Across from him, Hannibal and Tierney glance at one another briefly. Tierney looks uncomfortable, shifting slightly in his seat, and after a few beats of awkward silence pass, Hannibal clears his throat.

"Will." He says, his voice pitched low, addressing Will as though he has committed some faux pas. "That's not something we should be discussing-"

"No, no." Tierney quickly interjects with a wave of his hand. "You did say, Dr. Lecter, that it was important that I take responsibility for what I've done. I might as well start now." So saying, he then takes a sip of his wine, as though trying to steel himself, before he turns his gaze to Will. "I was in prison." He tells him, in an unnervingly matter-of-fact way.

Will blinks, completely caught off guard. "What?"

"Jessup Correctional Institution." Tierney explains. "I was originally sentenced to twenty years, but I was released on parole after fifteen." He smiles slightly. "Good behavior." He says, sounding proud.

Will stares at him, astonished.

He looks so normal. He *acts* so normal. It's hard to imagine him doing anything that would warrant twenty years in prison.

For a moment, no one speaks. Tierney glances from Will to Hannibal and back again.

"Well." He says with a shrug. "Now you know."

He turns back to his meal.

"What'd you do?"

“Will.” Hannibal begins to scold him quietly, but Tierney quickly shakes his head.

“No, it’s alright.” He reassures him. “That’s a question I’m going to get a lot. I need to be ready for it.” He seems to hesitate, and draws a deep, slow breath. “I, uh, I killed my son. My little boy - Jamie.”

Ringing silence meets his words.

For a moment, Will’s too stunned to speak.

“ *What* ?”

“I killed him.” Tierney says again. “But it wasn’t… it wasn’t ‘murder’ or a ‘crime of passion’ as they say. It was a mercy killing.”

“Mercy.” Will echoes, still staring at him, horrified. “How?”

Tierney sighs. Beside him, Hannibal is silent, his expression difficult to read.

“Jamie, he…he had severe autism.” Tierney says. “He couldn’t talk, couldn’t feed himself. He couldn’t use the toilet. He had tantrums. Bad ones. He’d scream, and cry, and kick. It was fine when he was little, you know, you could just…pick him up. Hold him until he calmed down, but as he got bigger…he got violent. He scratched my eye once. Bit me several times. This one time, I was standing behind him with my arms around his chest, trying to hold him down. Jamie threw his head back, trying to get me off him. He broke my nose.”

He shakes his head.

“It was round-the-clock-care.” He continues on. “It was constant. It was…it was a lot. And after a while, well…it starts to get to you.”

Across the table, Will is shaking where he sits.

“He didn’t ask to be that way.” He says, his words dangerously low.

Tierney looks up at him, surprised.

“I know that.” He tells Will. “I’m not saying it was Jamie’s fault what I did, of course it wasn’t! But you have to understand that a person can only take so much for so long.”

“You were his father.” Will snaps at him, his hands curled tightly into fists. “It was your job to protect him!”

“I know it was!” Tierney assures him, his voice absolutely raw with agony. “Believe me, I know. I wish sometimes it didn’t happen - there are days I wish more than anything that I could go back in time and undo what I did. But I can’t. And that’s not something that will ever change. I have to live with that. For the rest of my life I’ll have to live with what I’ve done.” He inhales a shaky breath. “I know what I’ve done is unforgivable, and there's part of me that hates myself for what I’ve done, but even so, I honestly believe that it was for the best. In a way, I *was* protecting him.”

“Protecting him?” Will echoes, incredulous, rising slowly to his feet. Hannibal watches him, sipping idly at his wine. “You killed him!”

“What kind of life do you think that boy would have had if he had lived?” Tierney asks him. “That’s no way for anyone to live!”

“That wasn’t for you to decide!” Will screams at him, tears spilling down his cheeks. “He needed you and you killed him!”

Tierney glances helplessly at Hannibal.

“You said he’d understand-” He mutters, petulant, irritated, the way Will’s daddy always spoke to him whenever he was struggling, and it’s then Will finally snaps.

He screams, and throws himself at Tierney. Tierney cries out as they go crashing to the floor, plates and glassware shattering around them. The chair is cracked and splintered underneath them, red wine spilling out across the rug. They grapple for a moment -Tierney’s panting, trying desperately to throw Will off him, but Will is unrelenting, blind with rage. He shoves aside his flailing hands and clambers up onto his chest, pinning Tierney to the ground. There’s a high-pitched ringing in his ears as Will begins to beat him, blood spraying out from Tierney’s mouth and nose and running down his chin and cheeks. It stains Will’s knuckles - ruby red and shining - and dimly, he can smell the rust and copper scent of blood as it stains the very air he breathes. He thinks he might be screaming, he isn’t sure, it doesn’t matter -

He doesn’t stop.

He doesn’t stop when Tierney’s hands fall limply at his sides. Or when he gurgles, choking on his blood. Or when his face is not so much a face but just a mass of bloody pulp and broken bone. He doesn’t stop when something brushes up against his shoulder, or when he hears someone distantly call his name, telling him to stop.

It’s only when someone grabs him from behind, wrenching him away, that Will is finally forced to stop.

He shrieks as he’s dragged back from the corpse, biting and clawing at the arms wrapped tight around his chest.

“Will.” A smoke-like voice whispers gently in his ear. “Will, that’s enough. *Stop* . You’re going to hurt yourself. Will-”

But Will ignores the voice, its words, the pain he’s only just now beginning to register along the bony ridge of his knuckles. He sobs, spitting curses as he does everything he can to try and break the hold that has him-

Then, suddenly, without warning, Will is jerked violently around, away from Tierney, so that he's no longer staring wide-eyed at the ugly, bloody mess he's made, but instead into the bottomless depths of Hannibal's dark eyes, who is gazing back at him with such wonder and devotion that it immediately takes Will's breath away.

He stops, blinking slowly up at Hannibal as he cups Will's face between his hands.

"Come back to me." Hannibal whispers, pressing their foreheads together. "Will, darling, please come back to me."

He says it like a prayer, and Will inhales a single shaky breath before he slumps against his chest.

"Oh, Will." Hannibal sighs as he wraps his arms around Will's quaking shoulders. "My dear, you were sublime. Remarkable boy, I've never seen such cruelty as yours. If I saw you everyday, forever, Will, I would remember this time-"

But before he can say anything else, Will wrenches himself free from Hannibal's slackened grasp and then throws himself against him, their lips colliding violently together like storm-tossed waves upon the shore.

Time seems to stop. Beneath him, Hannibal has gone completely still, staring down at Will with wide, shocked eyes as he continues to bite and suck the tender flesh between his teeth, kissing him with such fierce determination that it leaves him panting desperately for air. For several moments, Hannibal seems too stunned to do much else than sit there, but then he blinks, and pulls suddenly away.

"Will?" He asks. He sounds concerned. "Will, darling, what are you doing?"

Rather than answer, Will tries to kiss him again, but Hannibal grabs hold of him before he can.

“Will.” He says, more firmly than before. “What are you doing?”

“Kiss me.” Will demands. He’s dizzy, torn between the need for air and an even greater, burning need for Hannibal, the need to crawl inside his chest and live beneath his twisted, beating heart forever. “I know you want to - kiss me!”

“Will, dear.” Hannibal says gently, stopping Will when he tries to kiss him once again. “Stop.”

“Why?” Will whines, annoyed. “Don’t you want to?”

“I want it more than anything.” Hannibal tells him with a sigh, touching his forehead tenderly to Will’s. “But not like this. Not when you do want it too.”

“I *do* want it!” Will cries. “I do!”

“No, you don’t.” Hannibal tells him, sounding sad. “You think you want it, but it’s not real. It’s your empathy, Will - you’re just mirroring my desires, not acting on your own. You’re confused, dear boy, and probably in shock. I won’t take advantage of you now.”

“You’re not!” Will tries to tell him as Hannibal pulls him to his feet. “I know what I want - I’m not confused!”

“Let’s go.” Hannibal says, ignoring him as he leads Will from the room. “Come along, now, we need to get you cleaned up.”

Will snarls and growls the entire way up the stairs, muttering irritably to himself as Hannibal guides him down the hall and to the door that’s waiting at its end.

“It’s alright.” Hannibal murmurs when they reach it. “You’re alright, you just need sleep. Poor boy, you must be exhausted-”

When he pushes the door open, and Will sees the bed stretched out before them, he thinks for one split second that Hannibal has changed his mind, and attacks him once again with frenzied passion. Hannibal struggles to detach himself from Will's biting kisses, and has to wrangle him across the room to the en-suite bathroom on the other side.

"Will." He grunts, panting as he reaches out to turn the shower on. "Will. Sweetheart - stop. Calm down-"

But Will can't calm down - even as Hannibal strips him of his ruined suit, he's still doing everything he can to try and kiss him.

"Please." He whimpers, wrapping his arms around Hannibal's neck to draw him closer in. He sighs, pressing himself against Hannibal as he lifts his chin to brush their lips together. "I want this, I do! Hannibal, please-"

But Hannibal ignores both his efforts and his pleas, turning his head to the side as he wrestles Will out of his clothes.

When Hannibal finally manages to get him undressed, he all but shoves Will under the warm spray of the shower. Will sputters and gasps, and when he tries to step back out, Hannibal climbs in fully-clothed beside him. He grabs Will before he has the chance to try and kiss him again, wrapping his arms around his chest and turning him to face the shower head.

"Kiss me." Will breathes as he lays his head down on the broad plane of Hannibal's shoulder. His eyes slip shut, back arching against him. "Please, just kiss me!"

Hannibal shakes his head, but bends his head down just enough to softly kiss Will's cheek. Will shivers at his touch, slumping in his arms. He's quiet as Hannibal holds him under the spray, exhaustion washing slowly over him at last, and by the time he shuts the water off, Will's already half asleep. He feels dizzy, almost drunk, swaying as he stumbles from the shower. Hannibal is careful with him as he maneuvers Will over to the vanity, from which he takes a couple towels as well as a first aid kit. He dries Will first, and then turns to his knuckles.

“Does it hurt?” He asks, prodding at them gently. “Does it feel like anything’s broken?”

Will shakes his head, blinking tiredly as Hannibal first cleans, then wraps his hands in gauze. When he’s done, he then lifts Will in his arms and carries him back to the bedroom.

“Is this your room?” Will mumbles, hazy, as he lays him down amidst the cotton and the silk.

“Yes.”

Will yawns, trying hard to stay awake. “Is this my reward?” He asks. “For killing him?”

“Yes.” Hannibal says softly as he drapes Will with a blanket. “The first of many more to come, sweet boy.”

Will hums at that, content, eyelids fluttering as Hannibal lowers himself down to sit beside him on the bed. Hannibal’s hands are shaking slightly as he pushes Will’s damp curls back from his eyes, gazing down at him with complete and total adoration.

“Go to sleep, Will.” He says, bending down to kiss him on the forehead. “Go to sleep.”

“Will you stay?” Will asks drowsily, eyes already slipping shut.

“My darling boy.” Hannibal breathes just as he’s drifting off. “I’ll never leave.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

See you soon!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wakes slowly, blinking in the morning sunlight that comes pouring through the window and watching as the dust motes spin within its golden beams. He sighs, and for a single, fleeting moment, time seems to hang suspended - Will forgets just where he is and what he's done and everything that's happened.

For just a moment, everything is fine...

…and then that moment ends, and it all comes rushing back to him again.

Rage and hurt that's been festering for years, bursting out of him at last. A dam breaking. The world reduced to scarlet - blood and wrath conjoined. Broken skin and bloody knuckles, the swan song screaming of the dead and dying. Hannibal's arms around him. Desire like a fevered heat inside him.

Ruin.

Irredeemable ruin.

Life lost.

Innocence lost.

Himself lost…

It’s not long after that Will is swallowing a sob, choking on the horror of the waking nightmare he is living.

It’s finally happened.

He’s killed someone.

The thing he’s always feared would happen has finally come to pass.

He’s killed someone.

He really is a monster after all.

The sob that he’s been trying so hard to contain comes spilling out at last, and Will turns his head into his pillow, trying to muffle the sound as he slowly falls apart.

This isn’t what he wanted.

He didn’t want to be this way.

He just wanted to be normal.

All he’s ever wanted was to be normal.

He came so close.

He tried so hard.

He was going to be a profiler for the FBI. He was going to save lives. He was going to atone for every evil thought, every twisted desire, that he ever harbored in the darkness of his heart and mind.

And now, he'll never have that chance again.

He won't be able to lie to himself like he could before. Not now. Not after what he's done.

It will never be the same.

Nothing can ever be the same.

He will never be the same.

Will's so caught up in misery that he doesn't even notice the hand that settles in between his shoulders.

"Shh, Will." He hears Hannibal murmur as he lightly rubs Will's back. "It's alright."

"No, it's not." Will hiccups between sobs. "It's not alright - I killed someone."

"You killed a man who strangled his own child, Will."

"And that somehow makes what I did okay?"

"I would argue there are worse things you could have done."

“It doesn’t matter!” Will chokes. “I didn’t want this! I never wanted this!”

“You did.” Hannibal tells him, voice gentle but firm. “You just convinced yourself you didn’t.”

“Don’t you dare tell me what I did and didn’t want!” Will cries, clutching at his pillow for some semblance of balance. “You don’t know a damn thing!”

Hannibal is quiet for a moment. “You told me once,” He finally says. “That you liked the thought of killing people who deserve it. Was it not what you expected it to be? You didn’t enjoy it as much as you thought you would?”

Will shakes his head. “It was the ugliest thing in the world.” He insists, and tries to tell himself he isn’t lying, and that he didn’t enjoy every moment he was killing Tierney.

…That wasn’t everything he ever dreamed and more.

Beside him, Hannibal shakes his head.

“I know you, Will.” He says softly. “I know you better than you know yourself - I know that you don’t mean that.”

“No, you don’t! I hate you!”

Hannibal chuckles. “Oh, come now, darling.” He coos, nails dragging soothingly across Will’s back. “You don’t mean that, either.”

“I do!” Will snaps, not sure which he hates more - the fact that Hannibal finds his pain amusing or the fact he isn’t wrong. He doesn’t hate him. Not entirely. “I told you my deepest

pain and you used it against me just so you could get what you wanted! You knew what I would do to him if I found out what he did! You *knew* !”

“You’re far too intelligent to believe the world is so strictly black and white, Will.” Hannibal tells him in that same gentle tone as before. “Can’t it be both? That I did what I did not only to help you but to satisfy my own needs as well?”

Will sobs quietly. “But I didn’t want this.” He says softly. “Why can’t you understand I didn’t want this?”

“You’re grieving, Will.” Hannibal says, hand moving from Will’s back to settle on his head. “You’re mourning the person you once were, or at least, the person you once thought that you could be. Oscillating back and forth between anger and denial.”

“I’m not in denial.”

Hannibal snorts. “Of course not, dear.” He says, voice dripping with indulgence. He’s quiet for a moment. “How about we have a bath?”

“I just had a bath.” Will mutters irritably.

“You had a shower.”

“Yeah, because those are two completely different things.”

“What about breakfast?” Hannibal asks next, and it sounds as though he’s trying not to laugh. “Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“Come now, Will.” Hannibal says, thumb stroking back and forth through the tangles of Will’s hair. “Don’t punish yourself just to try and punish me, sweet boy.”

“Why not? Maybe I deserve to be punished.”

“I disagree.”

“Of course you do.”

Hannibal sighs. “Hurting and hating yourself won’t change what happened, Will.” He says.

“No, but it might help me feel better about it.” Will says and then swallows thickly. “Are… are you going to punish me if I don’t eat?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’ve been reborn, Will.” Hannibal says simply. “It’s the single most traumatic thing a person is expected to endure. In fact, the only mercy God grants us in this life is allowing us to forget the crushing pressure of the birth canal around us. Can you imagine what it must be like, being ripped from that cradle of warm darkness and thrust into the light? The terror and the agony of that first gasping breath? What you’re undergoing now, it’s the same thing, and arguably, it’s much worse, because you don’t have the luxury of forgetting, not this time.” He shakes his head. “I won’t make you suffer any more than you already are, dear boy. I love you far too much.”

Will blinks at that. “You love me?”

“Is that really so hard to believe?”

“This isn’t love, Hannibal.” Of this much, he is sure.

“My dear, there’s nothing else it could possibly be.”

Will considers this a moment, remembering the passion he had felt the moment he had looked in Hannibal’s eyes. How quickly it had overtaken him. It was intoxicating, that hunger he had felt, that longing unlike any he had ever known before.

But as powerful as it was, it was selfish and possessive.

It wasn’t sacrificial.

Will rolls over on his side. “I think you love me…in your own way.” He says slowly, glancing up at him. “And as much as you’re capable of.” He sighs. He should probably be more disturbed by that than he is. “But it still isn’t love, Hannibal.”

“Why not?”

“Because if you love something, you set it free.” Will tells him tonelessly. “And that’s the one thing that you’ll never do.”

Hannibal is quiet at that.

“I can’t let you go, Will.” He says at last, voice no more than a whisper.

“Why not?”

“You know why not. It’s too great a risk.”

“Yeah. Because you love your freedom more than you could ever love me.” Will answers bitterly.

“I would gladly go to prison for you, Will.” Hannibal tells him. “But if I did, I would never see you again.”

“I’d come visit you-”

“Even if I had some guarantee you would, it wouldn’t be enough.” Hannibal tells him. He sighs. “I *need* you, Will. The same way I need air. You’re all I have. I can’t go back to the way things were before. I can’t. Not now that I’ve known you.”

Will hums. “Every lonely monster needs a companion.” He mutters, wondering if Hannibal will understand the reference. He doubts it.

“Quite so. You’ve been alone your whole life, Will. Surely you of all people can understand that.”

Will doesn’t answer that. Above him, Hannibal cocks his head.

“Would you stay?” He asks, voice soft. “If given the choice?”

Will heaves a sigh.

“I couldn’t stay with you, Hannibal.” He answers, just as soft. “If I did, I’d lose myself to you.”

“You wouldn’t-”

“I would. Love is a god, and yours devours everything it’s offered. You would consume me until there was nothing left of me at all. Just the parts reflecting you.” He shakes his head. “Don’t tell me that’s not true.”

Hannibal looks at him, distraught.

“I would worship you. The way that you deserve. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you, darling-”

“Except the one thing that I want.”

Hannibal hesitates. “Except for that.” He agrees. A beat of heavy silence passes. “What would you like for breakfast, sweetheart?” He finally says at last. “Hmm? What sounds good? I’ll make you whatever you like. Just tell me what you want.”

“Buttermilk biscuits with gravy and grits.” Will says, purely for the sake of being petty. He has no idea if Hannibal has ever even heard of grits, but if he has, he hopes that he’s appalled.

Instead, he finds himself immensely disappointed.

“As you wish.” Hannibal tells him, rising to his feet and quickly disappearing from the room. Will turns his head with a frown, wondering if he’s really going to do it and deciding either way, he doesn’t care.

He settles back against his pillows.

His eyes are heavy from crying so hard.

+++

“Will…Will, dear, wake up…Will…”

Will opens his eyes with a groan.

“What?” He whines, glaring unhappily at Hannibal.

“I’ve made you breakfast.”

“Unless it’s biscuits and grits in all its southern glory, I don’t want it.” Will mumbles as he rolls over to his side, hoping Hannibal will let him just go back to sleep.

“Considering my origins, I doubt my efforts could be called ‘authentic’,” Hannibal says, sounding mightily amused, “But I assure you that I did my best.”

Will frowns at that. “What?” He asks, craning his head to look back over his shoulder. He blinks, surprised, when he sees the tray that Hannibal is holding.

Two biscuits, fat and flaky and drizzled with honey, sit atop a bed of gravy, thin ribbons of steam curling in the morning sunlight. Beside them is a little ramekin of grits, adorned with pats of melting butter.

It looks like something straight from *Southern Living* .

Will stares at it a moment longer, and then looks slowly back at Hannibal. “You made this?”

“A blog called ‘The Southern Belle’ helped.” Hannibal tells him with a smirk. “Apparently, the recipes it features have been passed down for generations, and hails them as ‘the best cooking on this side of the Mason-Dixon line you’ll find’, but I’ll let you be the judge of that.” He then lifts the plate, and delicately breaks apart a piece of biscuit. “May I?” He asks softly, holding it between his fingers.

Will hesitates, then slowly nods. He lets Hannibal feed him the bit of biscuit that he’s holding, and can’t help but moan at the taste.

Hannibal’s smirk widens. “Good?” He asks, dark eyes gleaming.

Will nods, blushing furiously.

Hannibal’s expression softens. “I’m glad.” He says before he lays the tray across Will’s lap. “Is there anything else I can bring you, Will?” He asks, voice barely more than a whisper.

Will shakes his head, peeking at him shyly.

“Alright.” Hannibal whispers, leaning down to kiss the crown of Will’s head. “Let me know if you change your mind. I’ll be back later for the tray.”

He leaves Will then, glancing back at him one last time before disappearing through the door. Their eyes meet, and something flutters in Will’s chest. It’s only once he’s gone that Will begins to feed himself.

He hates that it’s the best he’s ever had.

+++

Will spends most of the afternoon sprawled across Hannibal’s bed, drifting in and out of sleep. For once he doesn’t dream, and when he wakes, it’s something slow and peaceful, not

the sudden, breathless jerk from horror that he's used to.

Hannibal returns sometime in the early evening, asking that Will take a bath.

"I don't want a bath." Will says from underneath the blankets. "I just had one."

"Yesterday."

"Last night. Less than twenty-four hours ago."

"It's important for your mental health, Will. The benefits are incontrovertible."

"Yeah, you know what else is important for mental health? Not being held against your will for extended periods of time by America's Most Wanted."

Hannibal heaves a sigh before he reaches out and draws the blankets back. Will whines and curls up tighter in a ball. "Come now, darling, I insist."

Grumbling, Will allows Hannibal to loop his arm around his waist and lead him to the ensuite once again. He's quiet as he watches Hannibal prepare the bath with salts and scented oils, and inhales its perfumed steam with something close to rapture. Hannibal is smirking as he helps Will step into the bath and grins when lowers himself down into the water with a moan.

"Good?"

Will nods, blushing furiously.

Hannibal's smirk widens as he settles himself upon a little stool behind Will's head.

“Good.” He says as he begins to lightly wet Will’s hair with dampened fingers, and when Will reaches for a bottle of shampoo, he stops him. “Let me, Will.” He all but begs, and beams when Will agrees.

He’s gentle as he works the soap into a lather, and rubs it down into Will’s scalp. Will feels his nails scrape lightly over his ears and along the back of his neck, and he shivers at the touch. When he does, Hannibal leans down to kiss the nape of his neck, lips hot as a brand against his tender flesh. Will whimpers, overwhelmed, as Hannibal leans down to touch his chest.

“Let me do the rest.” Will begs, afraid that he’s enjoying this so much.

“Absolutely not.” Hannibal tells him, nipping lightly at his ear, and then proceeds to wash Will’s back and shoulders, massaging at the knots that lie coiled just beneath the muscle. Will moans again, louder than he had before, and by the time that Hannibal is satisfied he’s clean, he’s dizzy with exhausted pleasure, head slumped against the edge of the tub and his body limp beneath the water.

“It’s time to get out now, Will.” Hannibal murmurs, stroking at his cheek. Will frowns, refusing to open his eyes.

“Five minutes.” He mumbles, turning his head away.

“And after all that fuss about not wanting a bath.” Hannibal chuckles at him. “Come now, darling. I have dinner waiting.”

With a sigh, Will rises to his feet and steps dripping on the bath mat. Hannibal is quick to pat him dry then dresses him in clothes too big to be Will’s own.

“Are these yours?” Will asks as he rolls the sweater cuffs back from his hands.

“Yes.” Hannibal says, watching every little move he makes with rapt attention.

Will snorts. “Like what you see?” He jokes.

Hannibal’s lip curls into a smirk. “I’d like it better if you weren’t wearing anything at all.” He tells Will airily, ignoring him when he chokes. “But I know you far too well to dare and even dream for such a thing. Come, Will. Our dinner’s getting cold.”

Still blushing, mortified, Will follows down the stairs and trails hesitantly behind him to the dining room at the end of the hall. He’s expecting it to look the same as how he left it -in short, a crime scene - and is shocked to see there is no body, no ruined rug, no bloodstains on the walls at all. It doesn’t look scrubbed clean, it looks erased, as if last night had never even happened.

He glances incredulously at Hannibal, who offers little more than a slow, reptilian blink.

“Shall we sit?” He asks, before pulling out Will’s chair. Will sits, wondering how he did it and knowing that he’ll never tell.

They dine on oysters, wine, and thick cuts of “filet mignon” seasoned with rosemary and garlic butter. They talk late into the night until it borders on the morning, and it’s sometime after two am that Hannibal insists they go to bed.

Will’s surprised he doesn’t take him to the basement, but instead back to his room, and it’s only as he’s being lifted carefully to bed, that he realizes Hannibal might be expecting something from him in return.

The bath, the clothes, the food, the silken sheets he’s draped across…

Is this?

Will sits bolt upright in the bed, glancing nervously at Hannibal.

“Can…can I sleep in my room instead?”

Hannibal frowns back at him. “You can,” He answers slowly, “But, darling, wouldn’t you prefer to share the bed up here with me?”

Will chews his lip, suddenly afraid and more than slightly shy.

“I’m not…” He mumbles, avoiding Hannibal’s eyes. “I don’t…”

“You don’t what, Will?”

“I don’t want to.” Will tells him in a rush, biting roughly at his lip. “I don’t know what to do, I don’t…I don’t want that. Please don’t make me.”

Hannibal looks puzzled for a moment, but then he blinks, and his expression quickly morphs to one horror.

“No, Will.” He says, shaking his head firmly. “We’re not doing that. We’re going to sleep, that’s all. I would never ask that of you.”

Will shifts a bit, unsure, and when he doesn’t answer, Hannibal heaves a sigh.

“If you would be more comfortable in your room,” He says gently. “Of course I’ll take you. If you want my bed but would prefer to sleep alone, I’ll leave you. Just tell me what you want, sweetheart - it’s yours.”

The coppery taste of blood is on his tongue as Will ponders what to do.

“You really won’t make me?”

“Never.” Hannibal assures him, reaching out to brush his thumb against Will’s bleeding lip. “*Never* , Will.”

Will nods hesitantly. “Okay.” He says, voice shaking just a little. “Okay, let’s go to bed.”

“You’ll let me stay?”

Will looks away. “I don’t want to be alone.” He mumbles.

Hannibal smiles as he tucks Will carefully beneath the blankets and then climbs slowly in beside him. Will watches, still wary, as he reaches out to cup his face.

“Good night, my dear.” He says, thumb stroking lightly back and forth across Will’s cheek.

“Good night, Hannibal.”

+++

Sunday morning is a dreamy haze of winter sunlight filtering through coffee-scented steam, with Hannibal reciting poetry as Will lies languid in his arms.

“The beauty I behold is such that I cannot endure it,” He murmurs, trailing kisses up and down the column of Will’s throat. “It obliterates the senses to the point of death.”

Will answers with a sigh, content, and presses even closer. Hannibal moves his hand to caress the back of Will's head, fingers tangling in the fine curls at the nape of his neck.

"So delicate my shackles are." He muses quietly. "If only Jack had known that this was all it took to hold me."

"He probably would have thrown me to you that much faster." Will mutters, bitter at the thought. He shifts a little, trying to get comfortable, and thinking about what Hannibal said about shackles. "You don't go out with your friends like you used to." He says, blinking slowly in the golden light.

"To be fair, they were never really 'friends'." Hannibal shrugs.

"Yeah, but still. Don't you have anything better to do than lie around all day with me?"

"Not at all."

"You know, according to Dante, there's a special place in hell reserved for flatterers."

"Yes, I'm aware." Hannibal assures him with a smirk. "In a pit of excrement. Quite fitting. But I assure you, darling, I'm being entirely sincere - as much as I would have liked to see the Baltimore Opera's production of *Don Giovanni* tonight, without you on my arm and by my side, I fail to see the point."

Will is quiet at this. "You know that you will never have me on your arm, right?" He asks. "That there will never be a time that I can accompany you anywhere."

Hannibal doesn't answer him at first. "Yes, I know." He says at last, his voice soft.

"And you're fine with that?" Will asks, sarcastic.

“Hardly.” Hannibal says, pressing one last kiss against Will’s cheek. “But if I must choose between the pleasures of this life alone, and imprisoning myself with you, then I choose you, Will. Every time.”

“But that’s not much of a life for you either.” Will points out, blinking back tears.

“Perhaps not.” Hannibal agrees, and wraps his arms around Will tightly. “But it’s enough so long as I have you.”

+++

That evening, while Hannibal is busy making dinner, Will sneaks on tiptoe to the dining room, and the door that opens to the backyard. His fingers shake as he first unlocks the door and then slowly pushes it open, staring out into the darkness that lies stretched before him, snowflakes swirling overhead.

“Going somewhere?”

Will jumps and whips around, chest heaving as he stares fearfully at Hannibal.

Hannibal cocks his head. His expression is impossible to read.

Will hesitates, then lifts his head.

“I’m going.” He says, sounding braver than he feels.

“Are you?”

“Yes.” Will tells him, legs shaking underneath him. “And if you want to stop me, then you’re going to have to kill me.”

“Don’t tempt me, darling.” Hannibal says slowly, taking a single step closer to Will. “You know very well I could.”

“But you won’t.” Will says even as he steps back. “You can’t. How many times have you told me that I’m the only one who understands you? What will you have if you don’t have me?”

“And what will you have if you don’t have me, Will?” Hannibal asks him quietly. “You have no family, no friends, only Jack Crawford and the FBI, and you’ve seen just how much you mean to them. There’s nothing out there for you, Will. No one who appreciates you like I do.”

“At least I’d be free!”

“Yes, you would.” Hannibal agrees, moving steadily closer to him. “But at what cost? Your sanity? Your life? How long will they last, you think, if you go back to what you had before?”

Will can’t help but wince at that, and Hannibal, sensing weakness, closes the short distance that’s between them. He cups the back of Will’s head, gazing at him mournfully.

“I won’t stop you if you want to go, Will.” He murmurs, “But before you leave, please, just tell me this - would staying here with me really be so bad?”

Will hesitates, his eyes burning.

He slowly shakes his head.

Hannibal smiles at him sadly, and then he pulls away.

“Goodbye, Will.”

Will blinks at him, confused. He shivers in the cold, glancing over his shoulder at the door that’s still wide open, and then looks back at Hannibal, who frowns.

“Go on.” He encourages him gently. “I won’t stop you, if this is truly what you want.”

Will swallows thickly, choking on the unfairness of it all, and takes a few fumbling steps closer to the door. He turns his back to Hannibal, staring out across the thick, white fields of snow as he thinks of just how miserable his life has been until the moment he met Hannibal.

I’ve never known myself as well as I know myself when I’m with him . He finds himself thinking. *What* will *I have, if I don’t have him?*

He lingers there for several moments, and then he reaches out and slowly shuts the door. He glances back at Hannibal, who seems surprised.

“You’ll stay?”

Will nods, staring at his feet. “I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

Hannibal holds out his arms and brings him close, hugging him tightly as Will stands shaking in his arms.

“Perhaps it would be kinder then,” He murmurs, more to himself than Will, “If I took that choice away from you.”

Will stiffens in his arms. “What do you mean?”

Hannibal blinks then, as if waking from a dream.

“Forgive me, darling.” He says cheerfully, squeezing him. “I was just thinking to myself and somehow got a little lost. No matter - come over to the fireplace, dear boy - you’re freezing.”

Chapter End Notes

Uh-oh...what's Hannibal planning?

Thanks for reading!

See you next time!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Wait for it...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wakes up feeling sluggish, like he's overslept, and spends several lazy minutes basking in the sunshine that surrounds him, enjoying the peaceful quiet that it brings. He isn't sure how long he lies there, curled beneath blankets that have been tucked so carefully around him, and trying desperately to drift back off to sleep. Eventually, he gives up, and with a sigh, Will rolls around to check the time.

He blinks, surprised, when he sees the clock that's sitting on the nightstand just behind him.

11:34.

He's never slept this late before - Hannibal has never let him. He's always insisted on keeping Will on a tight sleep schedule, citing the various physical and psychological benefits of such a practice. Will can't help but wonder why he's not insisting on it now, especially after last night, when his control of Will had so very briefly slipped. Surely, he would be doing everything he could to reassert his power once again, and the fact that he's not sets Will immediately on edge. He sits up, glancing nervously around the empty room.

"Hannibal?" He calls, convinced that Hannibal is lurking somewhere just outside of sight.

Ringing silence answers him, and, suddenly afraid, Will scrambles from the bed and to his feet.

“Hannibal?” He says as he moves quickly to the open bedroom door, peering from around the frame and down the dark and quiet hall.

“Hannibal?” He tries again, a little louder than before, his voice echoing off the vaulted ceilings overhead, and again, there isn’t a response.

Frightened now, convinced that something’s wrong, Will steals swiftly from the room and down the stairs, his heart pounding in his chest.

The house has the oppressive stillness of a tomb, and the only thing Will hears is the sound of his own feet against the hardwood floor as he moves through the twisting hallways to the kitchen, knowing something isn’t right and hoping that he’s wrong despite the growing evidence he’s not - every light is off, every room he passes is completely empty, and with every step he takes, his unease only grows.

“Hannibal?” He cries out once again before he rounds the corner to the kitchen. “H-Hannibal?”

Will knows he isn’t there before he sees it for himself, because he knows that Hannibal would always answer if he called, that nothing short of death itself would keep him from his side. He’s not surprised to find the room is just as dark and empty as the others, but even so, his blood still curdles at the sight. The blinds are drawn low, and the stainless steel appliances sit stark beneath the veil of shadows that hang heavy overhead. Will looks around the room, the place he’s come to think of as the heart and soul of Hannibal’s domain, and sees that in the center, on the island, a light mauve envelope has been propped against a vase of flowers. Sweet williams, he thinks with dread as he moves further in the room.

He reaches for the envelope. His name is stamped across the front in curling, graceful script, and there’s something about the sight of that single word that feels so terribly final.

Will slips the letter free with shaking hands, unfolding it to read what he already knows is Hannibal’s goodbye.

He isn’t disappointed.

Dear Will,

It says, in Hannibal's spidery hand,

You told me once, that if you love something you set it free. As I'm sure you are aware by now, I think about you often, and I've spent many quiet moments considering these words at length.

I have only loved two people in my life - one of them I lost when I was very young. The other one, I sought to keep with me forever.

It was never my intention to fall in love with you, Will. After what happened with Mischa, I never expected to ever love anyone again, but knowing you as I do now, I suppose it was inevitable. We're just alike, you and I. You are alone as I am, because we are unique, and we're both alone without each other.

In my arrogance, I thought that I alone could make you happy, Will, but I realize now that what I had to offer you was never going to be enough. You are a wild thing, dear boy. You were never meant to be contained by anyone, least of all myself. To even try is an offense too great for words.

That being said, I won't ask for your forgiveness, Will, because I don't regret what I have done. As I've said, I only ever wanted what was best for you, and everything I've done, I've done for you. Which is why I now have to let you go.

If you love something, you set it free. Perhaps no truer words were ever spoken. I love you, Will, and therefore I can't keep you anymore.

Of course, this doesn't mean you're free just yet. Jack Crawford is still out there, and I'm sure it won't be long before he has you in his grasp again, But unlike me, he will never let you go, Will. It's important that you know that.

I would encourage you, as a friend, not to step back through the door he holds open, though I understand that you'll feel obligated to tell him what has happened, who I am. If you do, just know that though you'll try to find me, I promise that you never will. This is, unfortunately, goodbye.

Goodbye, my love. I hope you'll think of me fondly, as I so often think of you. That when life becomes maddeningly polite, you'll think of me. Think about me, Will, and all I've taught you. Don't worry about me. Live as you were always meant to live, dear boy, and know that I will always love you for exactly what you are.

Yours forever,

Hannibal

Will inhales a shaky breath as he finishes the letter and comes back to himself, blinking as he looks around the room, the paper crinkled in his hands. He's on the floor, and can't remember how he got there. The chill of the tile is seeping through the thin fabric of his clothes, and Will shivers as he pushes himself slowly to his feet.

Obviously, it isn't real. Obviously, this is just another test. No doubt Hannibal is screwing with him exactly like he always does - wind him up and watch him go, curious to see just what will happen next.

That's all this is and nothing more.

It isn't real.

It's not.

He hasn't left.

He hasn't.

"Hannibal!" Will calls out, angry in a way he hadn't been before as he moves from the kitchen to the hallway once again. "Alright, you've had your fun - you can stop now! You're not fooling anyone!"

He holds the letter in his hand as he strides quickly through the house, past the dining room where Richard Tierney met his end, and through the den where their two chairs sit side-by-side before the cold and empty grate. He ignores the liquor cabinet and the basement door, the place where he was kept so long, and instead moves to the garage.

“Hannibal!” Will shouts, furious, as he grabs the door handle and shoves it violently open. “Stop messing with me! I know you’re there-”

The car is gone. Hannibal’s stupidly expensive, ridiculous Bentley is nowhere to be found, and Will spends several minutes staring at the empty space before him, completely dumbfounded, refusing to believe what he is seeing.

He turns slowly back around. Pulls the door shut firm behind him.

“H-Hannibal?” Will asks, voice wavering a bit. “Hannibal, this isn’t funny anymore! Please, just answer me!’

But of course…he doesn’t.

The only answer Will receives is silence, a silence that’s so loud, it echoes through the dark and lonely house.

Will doesn’t know how long he stands there, waiting for a response that never comes, but it feels like both forever and hardly any time at all before he finally drags himself away. There’s a part of him that’s still convinced this is punishment for his half-hearted escape attempt the night before as he moves slowly back the way he came and over to the basement door.

He pulls it slowly open. Climbs morosely down the stairs.

He drifts dream-like past the ever swaying tarps and operating table, his fingers brushing lightly up against them as he reaches for his cell room door. It opens smoothly at the slightest push, and Will flips the lights on as he slips quietly into his room.

It’s exactly as he left it - the rumpled sheets, the unmade bed, the clothes tossed over the back of the chair beside it. The rolling cart is pushed against the wall, out of the way, and in the trash can, Will spies the torn popsicle wrapper, the red-stained stick, that Hannibal had

brought for him that fateful day. It seems as though an entire lifetime's passed since then, and it's strange seeing just how little things have changed despite the fact that so much has.

The only thing that's different is that the camera in the corner is shut off. For the first time Will remembers since waking in this room, the little light's not blinking like it always does, and it's this, more than anything else, that finally convinces him that Hannibal might actually be gone.

His breath hitches as Will climbs up on the bed and curls up tightly on his side.

He hasn't left. He tells himself, over and over, again and again as he slips slowly off to sleep. *He loves me. He wouldn't leave me - he can't. He loves me. He needs me. He's coming back. He's coming back for me. He hasn't left. He hasn't left me …*

+++

Will's not sure how long he lies there, waking with a gasp from nightmare-ridden sleep before drifting off once more, but he thinks it's been at least two days before the hunger drives him back upstairs, hoping he'll find something in the pantry or the fridge to keep him satisfied until Hannibal returns. Because Will knows, *he knows* , that Hannibal isn't really gone, that he's coming back for him the moment he decides that Will has suffered long enough. He just needs to be patient for a little while longer.

He has no idea just what exactly he's expecting, but Will's surprised when he opens up the fridge and finds it stuffed with pyrex glass containers, all of which are filled with food and have reheating instructions taped across their lids.

And on top of the stack, another mauve envelope sits waiting.

Will reaches for it, wondering just what else Hannibal has to say, and tears it quickly open.

Darling,

I understand that this is difficult for you, but please, do not linger any longer than you have to. There's nothing left for you here, Will. No reason you should stay. I've prepared enough meals to last you for the week if you find you can't bear to leave just yet, but after that, you need to. A life half-lived is a life not lived at all, and you, my love, deserve the best life has to offer.

All my love,

Hannibal

PS: If I might make a suggestion, start with the minestrone. It's my mother's recipe, and I assure you - it's delicious.

Will glares down at the curling script, hating Hannibal for leaving him and wondering just how far he plans to take this awful little joke. It's just cruel now, the length he's gone to convince Will that he's gone, and Will's not sure how much longer he can take without him. He wants Hannibal back. He wants to curl beside him by the fire, watching the reflection of the flames dance across the surface of his pitch-dark eyes as he recites for Will first Dante and then Milton. He wants their old discussions of Neitzsche and Jung, and the rapt attention that Hannibal bestows him when he rambles about bugs.

Will's never known anyone who could follow his train of thought so effortlessly as Hannibal can, nor has he known anyone who's actually interested in what he has to say.

He's never had anyone care so much about him as much as Hannibal cares so obviously for him.

He's never had anyone care about him at all. In any way.

He's never been adored, only barely tolerated or else he's been ignored.

He bites his lip.

He just wants it back.

He just wants Hannibal back.

Will shoves the envelope back inside the fridge before he turns away. He quits the kitchen, and storms over to the liquor cabinet, from which he pulls a bottle of his favorite whiskey.

He drinks it slow, savoring the burn that travels down his throat. He drinks until it doesn't hurt, and then he drinks some more.

It's a little after midnight before he finally passes out.

+++

Will's awake just long enough to realize what's about to happen before he vomits on himself. He groans, gagging at the smell, and turns his head in time just as his stomach heaves again. He brings up little more than bile, and Will spends several minutes shivering on the hardwood, breathing long and deep and slow and doing everything he can to try and will his nausea away.

When the room finally stops spinning, Will pushes himself shakily to his feet. He stumbles down the hall and to the kitchen, pulling off his ruined sweater before tossing it into the sink. He turns the water on, letting it wash over the worst of the mess, and then cups his hands beneath the icy stream to flush the taste of vomit from mouth. He doesn't quite succeed - it still lingers on even several sloppy rinses, and eventually, Will turns away, water dripping from his chin, to squint across the room.

The clock on the oven tells him it's just after four am, and Will can't help but sigh at that.

There's no way he's going back to sleep anytime soon. Not when there's a headache building just behind his eyes and his insides are still churning. He inhales a single, shaky breath and then looks miserably around the room.

“Hannibal?” He croaks, knowing he won’t answer but still hoping that he will. He waits, but after several moments pass and Hannibal does not appear, Will swallows down another sigh. He wanders from the room and down the hall, following the labyrinthe twists and turns until he finds himself standing in the foyer, staring at the heavy double doors that open to the street.

He hesitates for just a moment.

“Hannibal?” He calls, his voice soft as his fingers brush against the handle. “I’m going now. I…I don’t know if you can hear me or not, but if you can…” He trails off then. Swallows thickly before he speaks again. “G-goodbye.”

He slowly turns the handle and pulls it slightly open. As soon as he does, a gust of harsh, northeastern winter wind comes barreling inside the house, unforgivably cold and wild as it wraps Will in its grasp. He shivers, glancing down at the stained tee shirt that he’s wearing, the plush slippers Hannibal’s provided him, and debates whether he should try and find something a little warmer to wear.

No, he decides. Like Hannibal said, there’s no reason he should linger any longer than he has to. It isn’t like he’s going far, he’s just going to the nearest neighbor’s house and asking that they call the police. It should take only a few minutes - less than ten - for them to reach him. There’s no need for him to stay and look for warmer things to wear.

Will pulls the door shut tight behind him and shuffles from the porch steps down the cobbled pathway to the street, freshly plowed and sprinkled generously with salt. Will wraps his arms around himself, glancing first one way, then the other. Every house is dark, the Christmas lights put away for next year. The only light he sees is a streetlamp down the road and the distant glow of the Baltimore skyline. He sighs, breath fogging in the frigid air, as he trudges further down the street, a single, lonely figure in the dark.

Hannibal’s nearest neighbor has a house that’s no less stately than his own, with tall, proud columns and a balcony that overlooks the street. Will continues past the iron gate that bars it from intruders, trembling from the cold and cursing at the wind. His toes are numb. There’s a stabbing pain behind his eyes. A part of him is wishing that he never left the house, or that he at least had waited until the morning…

But Will knows that if he didn't leave the moment that he did, then he never would.

Just like he knows that if he turns back now, he'll never leave that house again.

Will stumbles to the next house, a sprawling Georgian mansion with dormers on the roof. Unlike the last one, this neighbor has left the gate wide open and the porch light on, as though they've been expecting him. Will stands there shaking pitifully at the end of their driveway, trying to convince himself to move.

Just go. He thinks, teeth chattering. *Just knock on the door and tell them you need help. Ask them to call the police. Or Jack. That's all you have to do and then this nightmare will finally be over.*

Except that's exactly not true, is it?

Like Hannibal said, this is never really going to be over. Once the police are called and they realize who Will is, they'll get the FBI involved. And then Will will most likely be taken to the nearest hospital and will spend the next few hours undergoing different tests, ensuring he's okay, with Jack hovering somewhere in the background waiting impatiently for the doctors to discharge him. And the moment that he is, Jack will whisk him swiftly back to the BAU forensics lab, where Will will be subjected to Beverly's probing, nitrile-covered fingers and the flash of Zeller's camera. They won't find anything despite how hard they'll look, and once they've collected what little they can, Jack will then interrogate him until Will is dizzy and delirious, insisting that there's nothing else he knows. Not that that will be good enough for Jack. Everyone knows he's obsessed with the Ripper, and he'll no doubt take the fact that Hannibal took Will personally. Will knows he'll never stop looking for him.

That he'll never, *ever* let Will go…

Will is choking on his misery, cheeks wet with slowly drying, freezing tears.

He doesn’t want this. He doesn’t want any of this. He just wants his little someday house in the Virginia countryside, somewhere he can see the stars and not worry about catching feelings that aren’t his. He’d like a couple dogs to play with, and maybe a nearby stream where he can fish, but mostly…

Mostly…

Mostly he just doesn’t want to feel so lonely anymore.

He’s spent nearly his entire life alone, never wanted, never cherished, and because of that, he had convinced himself that that was simply how it was always going to be. That no one could ever understand him, or even like him, and certainly not love him. That he was doomed to spend his nights alone and his days as barely tolerated, and only just so long as he was useful.

He never expected Hannibal. Never expected just how good he made him feel. Like he was something precious and worthwhile. Something meant to be adored.

Will’s gasping frantically for breath that he just can’t seem to catch.

He misses him.

He wants him back.

He just wants Hannibal back.

The wind blows, painfully cold as it ruffles his hair and grazes his bare skin, tugging at him, urging him back.

Will turns away.

He’s shivering so hard that he can barely walk, and it takes him twice as long to reach the house as it did for him to leave it. He stumbles up the stairs, tripping over feet that feel detached.

He opens up the door. Slips quietly inside. Drags himself up winding flights of stairs and down the unlit hallway to the safety and the comfort of Hannibal’s room.

The feeling is returning to his toes - small, sharp pin pricks of sensation as he rips his ruined slippers from his feet. His ears are raw, his arms tinged dusky pink and shake as Will staggers to the bureau in the corner. He opens the first drawer, and finds Hannibal’s favorite sweater neatly folded in the stack of nighttime clothing that’s inside. Will pulls it out and lifts it to his nose, inhaling deeply.

It smells like him - beneath the ghostly scent of bergamot and rum, the sweater smells like Hannibal.

Will hugs the sweater tightly to his chest and climbs up on the bed. He curls up tight around it, burying his face inside its scarlet folds.

If he closes his eyes, Will can convince himself that Hannibal’s still there. That he hasn’t abandoned him.

That he’s still right beside him.

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Will spends at least a day in bed, hunched around Hannibal’s sweater and watching as the sunlight rises slowly up the walls before descending down again. He doesn’t move. He doesn’t eat. When he needs to use the bathroom, he drags himself to the en-suite, and when he’s done, he climbs into the tub, curling up against the bottom until he falls asleep. He wakes up aching, and he’s glad.

His hunger is now bordering on nausea, and Will drinks water from the tap to try and numb the pain before he then slinks back to bed. He collapses back against the silken sheets, spots spinning in the corners of his vision as he drags Hannibal's red sweater up to his chest.

He needs to eat.

He needs to leave.

He needs to call for help.

…But he doesn't want to.

He doesn't want to leave.

He doesn't want to go back to the Academy, where people he's never met are chomping at the bit to kick him out.

Doesn't want to go back to Jack, who can pull him from the classroom on a whim and send him after the Ripper without actually *telling* him what he expects him to do (or else). He resents Jack for not caring about him beyond what he is good for, and the fact he wouldn't care at all if Will was normal.

No, he doesn't want to go back to that. He doesn't want any part of the pain of his old life.

He just wants Hannibal back.

Hannibal, who believed that all his dark and twisted parts were lovely, worthy of the most devoted worship.

Hannibal, who loved him when no one else ever did.

He wants him back.

All he wants is Hannibal.

His stomach whines. His head spins. Will thinks back to the first few days after Hannibal had taken him, and how afraid he was, convinced that he would kill him and thinking of the many awful ways that he would die.

How ironic that Hannibal will be the one to kill him after all. And without ever even laying a hand on him.

Will wonders if he should be concerned that he wouldn't have it any other way.

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He's back at the Academy, wandering the familiar halls alone.

The lights are off. Well, most of them are, and of the few that aren't, the fluorescents are flickering and humming loudly overhead, threatening to give out at any moment. The tile's cracked and crumbling beneath his feet. Every inch of the announcement board is covered with pictures of his face.

'Wanted.' They proclaim. 'Dead or Alive'.

Will stands frowning at them, wondering where everybody is, what's happening.

Should he be here? Are they looking for him? Is he in trouble? What happened? What did he do?

You killed someone . A nasty little voice whispers in the back of his head. *Murderer.*

No, I didn't mean it. I didn't want to. Hannibal made me do it. It wasn't me.

Wasn't it?

No. No, I never wanted that. I never meant to do it.

You think Jack will give a damn about any of that? You think any of them will care why you did what you did? The only thing they care about is the fact you killed someone. There's no denying it. You did it. You.

But if I just explain-

There's nothing to explain. You're just like him. You don't belong here.

The air feels dry and thin. Like he can't get enough.

Better run while you still can. The voice taunts. *Before Jack catches you. Again* .

Will scrambles back, tripping over himself as he turns around and runs. The smattering of fluorescent lights still burning flicker loudly overhead, a whine that's so high-pitched, it's deafening. Will races past his classrooms, through the twisting, turning halls, heart pounding in his chest.

He doesn't recognize a thing. Nothing is the way that he remembers it. It's as if someone's taken everything he knows about the Academy and completely rearranged it. He turns down one way, expecting the main entrance, and instead finds himself in front of Jack Crawford's

office door. He panics, stumbles back, and turns to flee into the darkness when he sees something in the corner of his vision.

He stops, staring down the hallway at the figure that stands eerily still just a few feet away.

Will swallows, heart in his throat.

“H-hello?” He calls, voice wavering.

There’s a slight pause that seems to drag forever.

“I told you to leave.”

Will blinks.

He knows that voice.

“H-Hannibal?” He asks, hopeful as he takes a single step closer.

“I told you to leave.” Hannibal says again. He sounds angry. Will inches closer, trying to see his face. “Why didn’t you listen to me?”

“I couldn’t.” Will whines. The shadows shroud Hannibal’s face in darkness. “I couldn’t leave without you. I need you, Hannibal. Come back to me.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer him at first. He waits until Will is within reach before he holds out his arm, drawing him close. He cups the side of his head, thumb stroking back and forth between his curls. He leans in close, pressing their foreheads together.

“Oh, Will.” He murmurs softly. “Don’t you understand?” He leans impossibly closer. “I don’t need you.”

The words are sharp.

They cut deeper than the knife that’s being driven through his stomach. Will gasps, and grabs desperately for Hannibal, clinging to him tightly as he drags the knife across his abdomen. His blood is hot and wet, spilling down the front of his pants and dripping loudly on the tile. He whimpers, staring up at Hannibal, who gazes coldly back.

“I don’t want you, Will.” Hannibal tells him. “Don’t you see? I never did.”

“Hannibal.” Will pants. “Hannibal, please-”

“You should have listened to me, Will.” Hannibal says. “If you had, maybe you could have saved yourself.”

He yanks the knife away.

A strangled noise erupts from Will, something torn between a scream and a sob, but Hannibal ignores him. Pushes him back.

Will collapses to the ground, hands pressed against the gaping wound that Hannibal has left him. He lies there, gasping, blood pouring from between his shaking fingers.

“H-Hannibal.” He says, breath hitching, reaching for him, but Hannibal ignores him.

“Goodbye, Will.” He says, before he turns away. “I doubt we’ll meet again.”

“No, Hannibal, please!” Will sobs, “Don’t leave me!”

“Will.” There are hands touching him, shaking him gently. “Will, wake up.”

“Hannibal! Hannibal, *please* !”

“I’m right here, Will.” He hears Hannibal say, his voice soft. “Open your eyes, you’ll see.”

Will’s eyes fly open with a gasp. He’s in Hannibal’s bed, the blankets twisted tight around him and completely drenched in sweat. For a moment he lies panting, lungs burning, cheeks itching from the salt tracks on his skin. There’s a hand against his forehead, stroking through his curls, a touch he’s felt a hundred times before from a hand he’d know from anywhere.

Will slowly turns his head, hardly daring to believe it-

Hannibal is leaning over him, face twisted with concern.

Will stares up at him, and inhales a shaky breath.

“Will?” Hannibal asks softly. “Are you alright?”

It takes Will several moments before he trusts himself to speak.

“You came back.” He says, his voice a whisper of sound in a room that seems to be holding its breath, waiting for his reply.

Above him, Hannibal cocks his head.

“You didn’t run.” He answers, just as awed as Will, and as soon as he says it, Will realizes what he’s done.

“You-” He snarls, trying to claw his face. Hannibal grabs his wrists and presses them firmly back against his chest, holding them there. “How could you do that to me?!”

“I thought you’d go to Jack, Will.” Hannibal tells him, his voice gentle. “That if I let you go, you’d run back straight to him. I needed to be sure that I could trust you, darling. I didn’t think I could before - but now I do.”

Will snarls as he tries to wrench himself free. “You’re unbelievable! How long were you going to make me wait before you finally came back?!”

“I had planned a week.” Hannibal tells him, sounding far too unapologetic of this for Will’s liking. “But I couldn’t bring myself to wait for you any longer.”

Will glares up at him through a swimming haze of tears. “Are you going to leave me again?”

“Never.” Hannibal says, leaning down to gently touch his brow to Will’s. “I’m never going to leave you ever again, darling. I promise.”

It’s so unsettlingly familiar to Will’s dream, and he can’t help but shiver at his touch, even as he presses closer. Hannibal hums and releases Will’s wrists to cup his face between his hands, holding him in place.

Will sighs, eyes fluttering shut.

“Are we going to leave?” He asks, nuzzling against him. “Are you going to take me away from here now?”

Hannibal hesitates, and Will opens his eyes. When he sees the look on his face, Will feels his heart sink.

“I can’t, Will.” Hannibal tells him, sounding sad. “It’s only been a few weeks since you were officially declared dead. The case is still fresh - someone could recognize you. And what would we do then?”

“We could leave-”

“And go where? Where could we possibly go that there isn’t some risk we’ll be discovered?”

“So, what? I’m just supposed to live forever in your basement?” Will snaps. “I’m not doing that.”

“I’m not saying you should.” Hannibal reassures him quickly, thumb stroking back and forth across Will’s cheek. “But if you want your freedom, Will, we need to give Jack something he can work with.”

Will blinks at that, confused. “You’re going to give me back to Jack?”

“Temporarily.” Hannibal shrugs. “Just long enough for you to tell him what happened.”

“Tell him what, exactly? That I was never actually taken? That I can’t remember what happened? Jack’s FBI - he knows how to interrogate people, Hannibal. He’s never going to buy that-”

“No, he’s not.” Hannibal agrees. “Jack isn’t stupid, after all. And he will never be satisfied until he’s caught the Ripper. As we’ve said before, love is a god, and perhaps Jack’s only love is the law.”

“And all gods demand a sacrifice.” Will mutters bitterly.

“Yes, they do.” Hannibal agrees with a smirk. “Which is why we’re going to give him one.”

Will looks sharply up at that. “What do you mean?”

Hannibal’s smirk softens slightly as he gently strokes Will’s hair. “Do you trust me, Will?”

Will hesitates, blinking up at him.

He swallows thickly, and tilts his head so that his lips brush Hannibal’s ear.

“ *Yes* .” He whispers, and Hannibal’s soft smile widens.

“There may be a way for us to be together, Will.” He tells him. “But for it to work, you’re going to have to be very brave for me. Can you do that, darling?”

Will nods again, more eagerly this time.

“Good.” Hannibal says, kissing his forehead. “Come, darling. We’ve got work to do.”

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It’s dark...

It’s cold…

There’s lights flashing in the distance, painfully bright in the surrounding blackness and slightly blurred around the edges…

On…off…on…off…

Growing gradually bigger, brighter, all the while…

Will's shaking violently, watching as the lights draw closer…

He blinks. The image sharpens.

He's standing in the middle of the road, his feet planted on the yellow line dividing it in half. He's dressed in nothing but his boxers and a tee shirt, which is frayed along the collar. There's snow on the ground, and only the moon and flashing lights to light his way. Gnarled trees are reaching for him in the periphery. There's a police car cruising slowly towards him, red and blue lights flashing even as it comes abruptly to a stop in front of him. Will lifts his arm, shielding his eyes.

His feet feel raw.

His head is killing him.

He has no idea where he is, or how he got here.

He turns a little from the lights and groans, confused, as two officers step out from the car.

They approach him slowly, their movements measured and controlled, as though trying not to startle him.

"You lost?" One of them asks, shining a flashlight at Will's face.

Will groans again, and has to force his eyes from screwing tightly shut. "What?" He croaks, squinting at him.

The officer is frowning, studying him closely. From the way he's looking at him, Will wants so bad to ask him if they've met before. "What's your name?" He asks.

"W-Will Graham."

The officer's eyes widen, and he looks over at his partner, who seems equally surprised.

"Will Graham?" The officer breathes. "The FBI trainee?"

Will frowns. "How do you know that?" He asks, teeth chattering.

The two officers exchange another glance.

"Do you know where you are, Mr. Graham?"

Will pants, trying to remember…

He shakes his head. "No." He whispers, breath fogging in the air.

The officers stand stunned and staring at him for a moment longer, like they simply can't believe just what it is they're seeing, what they've found.

Will feels a faint prickle of unease at their expressions, wondering what's wrong, and why they're looking at him like that…

"I think you'd better come with us now, Mr. Graham." One of them finally says, his tone gentle, kind, as though talking to a lost and frightened child who doesn't understand what's happening. Which, to be fair, Will doesn't, but he still finds it incredibly offensive. "There's a

lot of people who were looking for you, son - they're going to be very happy to finally see you again."

Chapter End Notes

Gonna be really busy the rest of this week and not gonna be able to get anything done this weekend with the holiday, so next chapter will probably be posted next week.

See you soon!

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

> WARNING!
>
> I know I've said this before, and you guys all know this, but this fic deals with a lot of dub-con/non-con issues. It's pretty much been the entirety of the story, but this particular chapter takes it to the next level. There is nothing graphic or bad, no one gets raped or assaulted or anything, but there are things that happen that some people might find upsetting. I don't want to say anymore or spoil what's about to happen, but please be aware that this chapter is a little more intense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A cavalcade of black SUVs arrive at the Innova Emergency Room roughly an hour later, their lights flashing and their sirens screaming as they come screeching to a halt beside the main entrance.

Jack Crawford charges through the doors a moment later, flanked by Beverly and Price and Zeller, his badge held out before him like a talisman.

“WHERE IS HE?!”

“Sir, what-”

“Will Graham!” Jack bellows, striding to the front desk and slamming his badge down in front of the receptionist. “Where is he?!”

“Sir, please!” She says, alarmed, as the SWAT team files through the door, guns and helmets cocked. “This is a hospital. There’s no need-”

“What’s going on?” From around a nearby corner comes a lanky man with wispy, thinning hair, his white coat billowing out behind him like a sail. “Frannie, who’s-”

His jaw drops when he sees the crowded waiting room, the semi-automatics standing at attention, wide eyes roving slowly first one way, then another, before they stop on Crawford. He swallows thickly.

“A-Agent Crawford?” He asks, stepping forward, hand outstretched. “I’m Dr. Aaron Thatcher, the attending physician. We spoke on the phone-”

“Will Graham.” Crawford barks, rounding on him. “Where is he?!”

“He’s here.” Dr. Thatcher reassures him, pulling his hand away. “Sir, *please* , there’s no need to shout-”

“I’ll ask you one more time!” Crawford thunders as he takes a few steps closer. “WHERE-IS-WILL-GRAHAM?!”

“Room 106.” Thatcher tells him, looking flustered. “I’ll take you there in just a minute, but, Sir, I-”

“You’ll take me to him now!” Crawford says as he pushes past him, following the signs that direct him to Will’s room, the forensics team hot on his heels.

“But, Sir!” Thatcher cries, racing after him. “There’s something you should know-”

“Is he hurt?” Crawford asks, his heart sinking in his chest.

“No, no, he’s fine-”

“Have you touched him?” Crawford asks next, ignoring him. “I told you not to touch him unless it was an emergency.”

“No, we haven't touched him.” Thatcher says, panting as they round the final corner to Will’s room. “But, Agent Crawford, I need to talk to you-”

Crawford doesn’t pay him any mind - across the hall, he sees Room 106. He closes the short distance quickly, grabbing at the door handle before yanking it roughly open.

Inside, Will jumps as the door swings violently back, jerking round as Jack comes barrelling inside. The moment he sees Will, he stops, staring at him, wide-eyed with breathless wonder.

“Jack, what is it?” Prices asks, as Beverly pushes impatiently past him. “What’s-”

He stops when he sees Will at last. “Oh my God.” He whispers, as though he can’t believe just what it is he’s seeing.

Will fidgets where he stands on crinkled paper, feet black with mud and peppered with small cuts, and dressed in nothing but an old, worn tee shirt and a pair of boxers that appear to be a size too small. He seems embarrassed, eyes darting nervously between Beverly and Jack, and trying to cover himself as best he can.

He swallows thickly. “J-Jack.” He says, voice rough. “I…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

The sound of his voice seems to snap Jack from his trance. He frowns at him. “What do you mean?” He asks, moving further in the room. Price and Zeller follow, eyes still bulging from their heads. “Didn’t mean what?”

“I didn’t mean to leave the campus.” Will tells him, sounding terrified, his legs shaking underneath him. “I swear I didn’t! I don’t know how I got here!”

“Were you drugged?” Jacks asks, furious, taking another step closer, his hands curled tightly into quaking fists. “Did he blindfold you?”

Will blinks at that, frowning at him. He hesitates. “W-Who?”

“The Ripper!” Jack snaps, impatient, looking like he wants nothing more than to reach out and roughly shake him. “Who else?!”

Will looks confused. “The Ripper?” He echoes quietly, unsure. “I don’t…what do you mean?”

“What do you mean, ‘what do I mean’?” Jack barks, and Will flinches at his tone. “It was him, wasn’t it? The one who took you?”

Will blinks again, and glances towards the others, their arms laden with equipment bags, eyes wet and staring at him as though they’ve seen a ghost. Behind them, Dr. Thatcher hovers in the doorway, his expression grim.

“Took me?” Will asks at last, voice small, and Jack looks at him, incredulous. “Took me where? Jack, what are you talking about?”

Ringing silence meets his words. Jack’s mouth is like a fish’s as it slowly drowns in air, opening and closing several times before Beverly finally speaks up.

“Will.” She asks him weakly. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know!” Will all but howls, eyes welling with frustrated tears. “No one will tell me anything! No one’s said a word to me since they brought me here! Is this because I left the campus? I’m sorry! I told you I didn’t mean it!”

“No, Will.” Jack sputters, glancing helplessly toward the others, who seem equally as flabbergasted. “That’s not what this is about-”

“Then what’s happening?! Jack, please, just tell me what’s going on!”

Jack just stares at him, dismayed, not sure what to say, what’s happening.

“Will.” Dr. Thatcher says suddenly, and though his voice is gentle, it seems loud in the otherwise silent room. “Can you please tell Agent Crawford what day it is?”

Will looks at him, mouth twisted in a frown. He shuffles a little. “I…I don’t know the exact date.” He mumbles, ashamed at the admission. “But it’s mid-November, right?”

For a moment, no one answers. Will feels his heart sink as he looks around the faces staring back at him. “R-right?” He asks, begging.

“Will.” Dr. Thatcher tells him in that same gentle tone as before. “It’s almost March.”

Will swears the temperature in the room drops ten degrees. He stares at him. “What?” He breathes, refusing to believe it.

“You’ve been missing for months now, Will.” Dr. Thatcher explains to him. “No one’s seen you in almost fifteen weeks.”

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“How could this happen?” Jack growls, pacing back and forth across the hall. He glares at Will’s closed exam room door, as though, somehow, it’s the one at fault. “ *What* , exactly, is happening?”

“I don’t know.” Thatcher tells him, eying him nervously. “We haven’t had the chance to fully examine him yet-”

“You could have warned me!” Jack snaps, glowering at him. “You might have said the kid couldn’t remember anything when I came in!”

“I tried!” Thatcher says, exasperated. “You weren’t listening-”

“What could have caused this?” Jack demands, ignoring him, his thoughts racing, trying desperately to understand. “How could he not remember anything that’s happened to him in a span of *months* ?”

“Amnesia of some kind.” Thatcher says with a shrug. “Perhaps whatever happened to him was so traumatic that he’s repressing the memories of it. Perhaps he hit his head. But until I examine him more thoroughly, Agent Crawford, I’m afraid I really can’t tell you.”

“And you really didn’t find anything?” Jack asks, refusing to believe him. “When he first came in, there was nothing wrong with him?”

“Nothing we could find.” Thatcher says with a shrug. “His feet are pretty torn up, but nothing that required immediate treatment. Sir, you told us not to touch him unless we absolutely had to, and we haven’t. Once you’ve collected your evidence and let me take a closer look at him, I’ll be able to tell you more.”

Crawford nods. “Alright.” He mutters to himself. “Alright.” He seems to hesitate. “The officers who found him.” He says after a moment. “They’re still here?”

“They’re in the nurses’ lounge.” Thatcher tells him. “We figured you’d want to talk to them, but we didn’t want them in the way while we were doing our initial assessment.”

“Good.” Crawford says, nodding again. “Alright. I’ll see them in a bit, but for now, we need to concentrate on Will. Can you perform a forensic exam for us?”

“I can.” Thatcher tells him, looking somewhat less than enthused by the idea. “But before we begin, I’d like to bring a nurse in to assist me.”

“That’s fine.” Crawford says, waving his hand. “Go grab someone. In the meantime, I’d like to talk to Will.”

“Go right ahead.” Thatcher says, nodding at him as he begins to turn away. “I’ll be right back.”

Jack waits until he disappears around the corner before he forces himself to take a deep breath, his eyes slipping shut. Truthfully, he’s shaken to his core, but he knows he needs to seem calm and in control. He takes another breath, and then, adjusting his expression, steps back through the door.

Four pairs of eyes whip immediately around to greet him, staring at him as Jack moves further in the room. Will remains on his examination paper, shifting his weight from one bloodied foot to the other, while Beverly and the others finish setting up their various equipment on the other side of the room. They watch as Jack comes to a stop beside Will, who sneaks wary glances up at him through the tangles of his hair. Jack heaves a sigh.

“What’s the last thing you remember, Will?” He asks, uncharacteristically gentle.

Will swallows, fingers playing with the fraying hem of his shirt. “I…I remember going to see the Ripper’s last victim.” He says, voice somewhat hoarse. “In the garage.”

Jack frowns at that. “Do you remember leaving? What we talked about?”

Will shakes his head, trembling where he stands, and Jack wonders if it’s because he’s scared of what’s happened or if it’s because he’s picking up on Jack’s frustration. He takes a smaller, shallow breath before he speaks again.

“That was November 17th, Will.” He tells him. “It’s February 26th, now. You really don’t remember anything else?”

Will shakes his head. “No.” He whispers.

“Will, are you hurt?” Beverly chimes in then, much to Jack’s annoyance. “Does anything hurt right now?”

“My…my feet are sore. Can I sit down?”

“Not yet.” Jack tells him firmly. “First, Beverly needs to collect some evidence from you. Then the doctor needs to take a look at you.”

“He already did that.”

“He needs to do a full forensic exam, Will.” Jack tells him, his tone brooking no room for argument. “There might be evidence on your body we’re not aware of.”

Will seems to consider this. “You think the Ripper had me this entire time?” He asks, voice barely more than a whisper.

“You were investigating him when you disappeared, Will. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

“But why didn’t he kill me?” Will asks him, sounding desperate, as Thatcher slips inside the room, an older woman dressed in floral scrubs behind him. “What was he doing with me this entire time?”

“That’s what we’re going to try and figure out.” Jack tells him, looking over his shoulder at Thatcher and his nurse. “Are you ready?”

“If you are.”

“Let my team do their initial assessment and then you can proceed.” Jack tells him, folding his arms across his chest. “Z?”

Zeller steps forward, camera in his hands.

He spends a couple minutes photographing Will from several different angles before he finally steps away. Across the room, Jack nods, approving.

“Beverly?” He says next, and she nods back, hands encased in blue nitrile and her face behind a shield. She approaches Will with a smile that seems strained, holding a roll of clear tape. “Alright, Will.” She says. “I just need to get a few samples from your clothes first, okay?”

Will nods, looking at his feet.

“I’m gonna start with your shirt.” She goes on, tearing off a piece of tape and laying it across the fabric of his shoulder. “And go from there. Just stop me if you need a break, okay?”

Will nods again, and stands quiet as she moves slowly across his shoulders and then down his back before moving to his front. Every piece of tape lifts clean each time she pulls it back, but she bags them just the same. “Might be some trace evidence.” She explains as she seals the last bag shut. “I’ll let you know if I find anything interesting.”

She seems to falter then, glancing back at Jack, who glares back at her, unmoved.

She sighs. “Okay, Will.” She tells him then. “I, uh, I need to do your bottoms now, alright? I’m almost done, don’t worry.”

Will looks over at her, horrified, before turning pleadingly at Jack. He shuffles a bit. “Can’t someone else-”

“Katz is the best we’ve got, Will. And a professional.” Jack tells him sternly. “The faster you cooperate, the faster this will all be over with.”

Will cringes, mortified, she presses the tape along the length of his boxers. She starts at the sides before moving to his back, and does his front as quickly and efficiently as she can. When she’s done, she hesitates again.

“Um.” She says, looking absolutely miserable. “I need to, uh, get between. Can you spread your legs for me, Will?”

Will swallows back a grimace and does as she asks, widening his stance just far enough for her to slip her hand between his legs. He’s relieved when she finally pulls away.

Behind Jack, Thatcher and his nurse observe them with a frown.

“Okay, let’s check your nails.” Beverly murmurs next, hands shaking as she slips the last bit of tape inside an evidence bag. Will nods, and neither of them speak as she then scrapes beneath his fingernails, debris drifting out from underneath to the paper just below his feet. When she’s done, Beverly and Price exchange a sympathetic glance.

“Will, I need you to, um,” Price says, clutching two more evidence bags tightly in each hand. “I need you to remove your clothes now. Please.”

For a moment, Will looks stunned, staring at him wide-eyed and open-mouthed with horror. Hesitantly, Price takes another step closer, and it’s only then Will finally answers. “No!” He cries, scrambling back away. “No, please!”

“Come on, Will.” Price says, attempting to sound nonchalant, or even cheerful, and falling miserably short. “Nothing we haven’t seen before-”

“I don’t care! No!”

“Will!” Jack thunders, and everybody jumps. “This is a federal investigation involving the abduction of an FBI agent-in-training and the apprehension of a wanted killer! If you do not cooperate, you will be directly responsible for any other lives that are lost! Do you understand?”

Will stares at him for a moment longer, and then he nods his head. He removes his shirt, shivering in the chilly exam room, and hands it over to Price without looking at him. Price quickly folds it up and drops it in the evidence bag, and then turns a little to the side, as though he’s trying to give Will privacy. Will hesitates, lip trembling, and then slowly pulls his boxers down his thighs. He steps out of them, looking like he’s trying not to cry, and then holds the garment out to Price, who’s quick to take them from him.

“Thanks, Will!” He says, with painfully false cheer. “These will be very helpful!”

Will doesn’t answer him, and refuses to look at anyone as he stands bare and trembling before them.

“Zeller.” Jack mutters, waving at him to come forward, which he does with great reluctance. He photographs Will once again without his clothes, avoiding Will’s eyes when he finally steps away.

“That’s, uh…that’s everything.” He says, glancing anxiously at Jack.

“Good.” Jack nods, and turns his head toward Thatcher. “You ready?”

“If you are.”

“Alright.” Jack says. “Will? Dr. Thatcher is going to be conducting a forensics exam for you, but we still need to stay in the room to document his findings. Okay?”

Will shrugs, still staring at his feet, his hands cupped around his groin. Jack seems satisfied with this as an assent.

“Alright.” He says with another nod at Thatcher. “Proceed.”

Dr. Thatcher ignores him and takes a couple steps closer to Will.

“Hi again, Will.” He says, smiling at him. “I know we’ve already taken a quick look at you when you first got here, but I just need to help Agent Crawford collect any other evidence he might need, alright?”

Will nods, shifting on the paper.

“We can stop at any time it gets to be too much, okay? Just say ‘stop’ and we will.” Dr. Thatcher reassures him. “Are we okay to get started?” When Will nods, his smile widens. “Great!” He chirps, waving at the nurse. “This is Shauna, Will. She’s going to be helping with this part of the exam. Okay?”

“Hi, Will.” Shauna coos, taking a small step closer to him. She’s an older woman, with flecks of gray in her wavy, auburn hair and soft, brown eyes.“It’s nice to meet you. I know this is scary, sweetheart, but I promise, we’re just trying to help you. We just want to make sure you’re okay, and then we’ll get you settled in for the night, alright? You got nothing to be embarrassed about, hun.”

Will nods again, peeking shyly up at her.

He can’t help but like her and the quiet calm she brings.

“Can you get his vital signs and height and weight while I get everything ready?” Thatcher asks, distracted as he begins to lay his tools across a nearby surgical tray.

Will tries not to look at them too closely.

“Sure thing, Thatch.” Shauna says cheerfully. “Will, can you come with me, sweetie?”

Will shuffles obediently to the corner, and stands quietly atop the scale. “Five foot…nine.” Shauna mutters as she measures him. “And it looks like you’re…a hundred and thirty pounds. Good! Alright, Will. Let’s take your temperature real quick, and then we’ll get your blood pressure.”

Will submits to everything she asks without a word of protest, but keeps his eyes fixed firmly to the ground as she then collects his different rates and values, counting out his breaths and blood flow.

“Alright, hun.” She says as she takes the odometer from his finger. “That’s everything. You’re doing great. Dr. Thatcher? Are you ready for us?”

“Ready.” Dr. Thatcher tells her cheerfully, patting the examination table with gloved hands. “Alright, Will, just hop up on here for me, and we’ll get started.”

Will does as he’s asked and climbs carefully up on the table, doing everything he can to shield himself from view. Dr. Thatcher waits patiently as he settles himself on the paper, which crinkles loudly underneath him.

“Alright, Will. I know I’ve asked you this already, but I’m gonna ask you again just to be sure - does anything hurt? Are you in any pain?”

Will shakes his head. He’s shivering, and keeps his arms wrapped tight around himself.

“Are you sure? Nothing hurts?”

“Just my feet.”

“Yeah, they look pretty rough.” Thatcher tells him, wincing sympathetically. “We’ll get them cleaned up in just a minute, alright, champ? First I just need to finish my exam.”

Will nods, and forces himself not to curl into a ball.

“I'm gonna start with your head.” Thatcher warns him. “And then work my way down.”

Will nods again, and closes his eyes as Dr. Thatcher begins to gently probe along the top of his skull.

“Any pain?”

Will nearly shakes his head. “No.” He says instead.

“Alright. I’m going to take a sample of your hair, Will. It’s going to help Agent Crawford and his team with the investigation, okay?”

“Okay.” Will croaks.

“I’m going to pluck a couple hairs now.” Thatcher warns him. “Little pinch.”

Will doesn’t flinch as he takes a couple hairs, but he does shrink back when Beverly steps forward to collect them.

“I’m going to continue now, Will.” Thatcher tells him then. “I’m going to check your face and neck and then your shoulders. Alright?”

Will nods, biting at his lip as Thatcher runs his hands along his brow and nose, and the hard ridge of his cheekbones. He folds back his ears, and checks inside his mouth and throat before he swabs them.

“Still no pain?” He asks, his touch featherlight as he skims along the column of Will’s neck.

“No.”

“Good. I’m not finding anything so far. Just let me know if anything hurts, alright?”

“Okay.”

He listens to Will’s heart and lungs, and calls his findings (all normal) back to Shauna, who alternates between scribe and assistant with fluid ease.

“You’re doing great, sweetie.” She tells Will, squeezing his hand when Dr. Thatcher tells him to lay back. “Almost done.”

Will’s tense as Dr. Thatcher presses on his abdomen, frowning slightly. “So far, so good.” He tells Jack, who stands with folded arms and furrowed brow. “I’m not finding anything wrong.”

“Have you taken any blood samples yet?”

“No, not yet. We wanted to make sure we had your permission before we did anything invasive.”

“Go ahead and take it now.” Jack tells him. “Get as much as you can - we’re gonna need a lot.”

“Wait!” Will squeaks, as Thatcher turns to grab a needle and some test tubes. “I don’t want that!”

“It’s important that we take a sample of your blood, Will.” Dr. Thatcher explains to him patiently. “As quickly as possible. We don’t know what you’ve been exposed to while you were missing. You may have been drugged.”

“I don’t want to do this!” Will tells him, hugging his arms tightly to his chest. “Please, I don’t want to!”

“Will, knock it off!” Jack snaps at him, impatient. “It’s just a little blood! You know we have to do this!”

“Thatch, he’s gonna faint.” Shauna mutters quietly to Thatcher. “He’s too skinny.”

“Get some apple juice for him.” Thatcher tells her. “We should have some in here somewhere.”

Will watches as she moves away, bustling about the cabinets. He jumps when Dr. Thatcher lays his hand over Will’s shoulder, looking down at him with pity. “Will, listen to me.” He says. “I know that this is very frightening for you, but we *need* to check your blood, champ. We need to know that you weren’t given anything dangerous.”

“But I feel fine!” Will tells him as Shauna comes back to them again, a juice box in her hand. “Honest, I do!”

“Just because you feel fine now doesn’t mean you are, bud.” Thatcher tells him. “Please, Will - I won’t do anything unless you’re ready, but we can’t help you if you won’t let us-”

“Dr. Thatcher!” Jack suddenly booms, and everyone but Shauna jumps. “As I said before, this is a federal investigation. Take his blood - *now* !”

Dr. Thatcher stares up at him. “Agent Crawford,” He says slowly. “The patient hasn’t given his consent. I can’t.”

“If you don’t take his blood,” Jack snarls, stepping closer, badge winking at his hip. “If you so much as hesitate to do *any* part of this exam, I will charge you with obstruction of justice, Dr. Thatcher. Do I make myself clear?”

“But Will hasn’t-”

“DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?!”

Thatcher flinches. “Yes, Sir.” He mumbles before he turns once more to Will. Beside him, Shauna looks disgusted. “Alright, Will.” He says, with far less cheer than he had before. “I’m going to take some of your blood now-”

“No, Dr. Thatcher, please! I’m…I’m not ready yet!”

“I promise I’ll be *really* gentle, Will.” Thatcher says, ignoring him as he ties a tourniquet around his arm. “You’ll barely feel a thing.”

“No, please-!”

“It’s alright, sweetie.” Shauna tells him, leaning down to hug him as Thatcher slips the needle in his vein. “I know - I don’t like needles either. Just look away.”

Will turns his head, sobbing quietly into the crook of her neck as Thatcher fills vial after vial with his blood. Shauna pets his hair, and coos at him encouragingly. “Almost done.” She says as he pulls the needle from Will’s arm. “Just a few more things and then we’re done.”

Will's quiet, shivering and white beneath her, the room tilting alarmingly around him.

"I'm gonna put a rush order on these." He hears Thatcher tell Jack, but the words are muffled as though he's underwater. "We'll know within an hour or so if he's got anything concerning in his system."

"Here, sweetie." Shauna suddenly says, and holds the little juice box to Will's lips, straw bent so that he doesn't have to lift his head. "Just stay down - if you get up too soon, you'll faint. Here, I'll hold this for you. Shh. There we go."

Will does as she instructs, and takes a couple sips of juice before he pulls away. "I-I don't feel good." He mumbles, and it's strange, but there's something about the whole situation that feels uncomfortably familiar, like it's happened once before...

"We're almost done, sweetie, I promise." Shauna tells him, running her fingers through Will's hair as she turns anxiously to Thatcher, who's now examining his legs. "Dr. Thatcher just needs to do a couple more things and then you can go to bed."

"Here, let me check your feet, Will." Thatcher says. "You just stay right there with Shauna, alright?"

Will nods, mortified and miserable, as Zeller moves again to photograph the bottoms of his feet, which are caked with dirt and dying blood. After Zeller gets a couple close-ups of the damage, Thatcher then proceeds to clean them, little bits of dirt fluttering to the paper that's still spread beneath the table.

"Multiple shallow lacerations." Thatcher tells Jack. "Probably just from walking barefoot."

Jack nods, jaw tight, as Thatcher smears Will's feet with ointment and then bandages them tightly. When he's done, he heaves a sigh.

“Okay, Will, there’s just one more part we still need to do.” He says, and Will can’t help but stiffen at the way he sounds. “How are you feeling? Do you need a minute?”

“I’m alright.” Will mumbles, blushing at the fact that Jack and the others saw him slumped and shaking on the table, that Shauna had to hold his juice for him. “Better than before.”

“Glad to hear it, champ.” Dr. Thatcher says, offering him a tiny smile. “Alright. If you’re feeling up for it, Will, I’d like you to scoot back a little on the table for me.”

“Careful, sweetie.” Shauna warns, helping him move back. “You’re still awfully pale.”

Once he’s settled, Dr. Thatcher reaches down beneath the exam table and pulls two poles out from underneath it. There’s a metallic grinding as he adjusts them into place.

“Alright, Will.” He says in a brisk, matter-of-fact way that sets Will immediately on edge. “Feet in the stirrups, please.”

“ *What* ?!” Will squawks, scrambling up to better see the metal poles he has stretched out before him. His heart sinks when he realizes what’s about to happen next. “No!” He begs, heart pounding in his chest. “No, please, I don’t want to!”

“Will, you know we have to!” Jack tells him, sounding exasperated. “We don’t know what he did to you-”

“But I feel fine!” Will cries, looking frantically from Jack to Thatcher. “I would feel it, wouldn’t I?! If he did something?”

“Not necessarily, Will.” Thatcher explains gently. “He might have given you an STD. Or he might have done something a while ago and the injury is now either fully or only partially healed. We still need to check to make sure.”

“Please, *please* , I don’t want to!”

“Will, that’s enough!” Jack thunders at him. “I’ve already told you once just how important this examination is - I won’t do it again. Now, either cooperate with Dr. Thatcher or he’ll have no choice but to sedate you! Am I clear?”

Will’s only answer is a sob.

“Put your feet in the stirrups.” Jack barks at him. “ *Now!* ”

Reluctantly, Will does as he’s told, and lifts shaking feet to settle in the footholds at the end of the stirrups. He chokes as Dr. Thatcher positions himself between his open legs. “I’m going to take a sample of your pubic hair now, Will.” He tells him. “Same as before - slight pinch.”

Will hiccups, tears streaming down his face as Beverly comes forward once again to take the samples he collects. Shauna stands beside him, one hand clasping Will’s while the other combs his hair.

“Almost done, sweetie.” She murmurs, again and again as Dr. Thatcher then proceeds to lift Will’s member, inspecting it for sores. “You’re doing great…we’re almost done. Shh.”

Will’s tense as Thatcher cups his balls and rolls them in his hand, and it’s not until he’s run a swab along the length of his genitals that he finally relaxes. “Nothing so far.” He says. “Will, move up a little please.”

He needs to help him, angling Will’s hips just so before he sits back on his stool.

“Okay, Will.” He tells him. “I need you to relax for me. I need to check your anus for signs of tearing. I’m also going to be testing for STDs. Just relax - this is gonna be cold.”

He then slips a lubricated speculum inside of him, and spreads him carefully open even as Will sobs. Across the room, Beverly is turned away, face screwed tight while Price blinks rapidly at the ceiling. Zeller glances nervously around the room, as though he's not sure where to look, his camera still clutched in his shaking hands. Only Jack stands resolute, unmoved, glaring at the scene before him.

"Just a little longer, Will." Thatcher chants, frowning as he probes around. "I'm almost done, I'm almost done." He sits back, still frowning, and looks hesitantly at Jack. "There's nothing." He tells him. "I can't find anything wrong with him."

"Alright. Z, get a picture just in case." Jack says, waving him forward. Zeller drags himself closer, refusing to look Will in the eye as he crouches down between his legs. He snaps a couple pictures, looking sick, and then quickly moves away.

"Alright, Will, we're done!" Thatcher says as soon as Zeller's back across the room. He sounds relieved, pulling off his gloves with a snap as Shauna shifts a little, leaning down to talk to Will, who's gone completely silent.

"Did you hear that, sweetie?" She says, cupping his cheek. "You're all done. You did great."

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Thatcher says, looking like he wants nothing more than to get as far away from there as possible. "Okay." He says, clapping his hands together. "Here's the plan: Shauna's gonna get you a gown, and while you're getting settled for the night, I'm gonna get your blood down to the lab-"

"Will." Shauna murmurs softly, tapping lightly at his cheek. She's still half draped around him, shielding him from view as Dr. Thatcher prattles on behind her. "Will, can you hear me? Will?" She turns suddenly to Thatcher, looking frightened. "Thatch, something's wrong."

Thatcher looks over at her sharply, and then glances back at Will. When he sees his face, he immediately stiffens.

"Will?" He calls, and Shauna quickly steps away to give him room. "Will, can you hear me? Will?"

“What is it?” Jack barks, taking a single half-step closer. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s not responding…” Thatcher mutters as he taps Will gently on the cheek. Beneath him, Will stares unblinking at the ceiling, his expression blank, cheeks wet and shining in the glare of the fluorescent lights. Thatcher looks slowly up at Jack. He seems horrified. “I think that he’s dissociating.”

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Jack and his team watch silently as Will is wheeled away, strapped atop a gurney with a blanket draped across him, still staring blankly at the walls. Shauna follows closely at his side as he disappears from view around the bend.

Jack is shaking so hard he can barely contain himself as he turns slowly back to Thatcher, pointing at the empty exam lane behind him. “What happened in there?” He asks, voice incredibly calm despite how angry and afraid he is.

“I don’t know.” Thatcher tells him, looking nothing short of rattled. “He was fine one second-”

“I don’t know if he was ever ‘fine’.” Jack hears Beverly mutter under her breath before turning his attention back to Thatcher.

“-some kind of trauma response.” He’s saying, as he runs a hand through his thinning hair. “Maybe something I did reminded him of his time with the Ripper, I don’t know.”

“Well, how long is he gonna be like that?” Jack asks impatiently. “We still need to talk to him.”

Thatcher hesitates. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean ‘ *you don’t know* ?!”

“I mean I don’t know.” Thatcher almost snaps, looking annoyed. “Look, whatever happened in there, it was obviously very upsetting for Will, and his mind shut down in an effort to try and protect itself from any further psychological harm. He won’t wake up again until he feels safe enough to do so, and whether that’s a couple hours from now or a couple months from now is anybody’s guess.”

“So just what the hell are we supposed to do, then?” Jack demands. “Nothing? Sit and twiddle our thumbs until he finally decides to snap out of it?! We have a killer to catch! We don’t have time for this!”

“Agent Crawford, I understand your frustration,” Thatcher tells him, sounding firm. “But there’s really nothing we can do. I’m going to order Will an MRI to rule out a physical cause for his sudden change of consciousness, and one of our neurologists will take a look at him first thing in the morning, but beyond that, we just need to be patient.”

Jack doesn’t like this in the slightest, but knows there’s only so much either of them can do. He nods slightly. “Alright.” He says at last, shoulders slumping slightly. “Alright.”

“I’m gonna run Will’s blood down to the lab.” Thatcher tells him and begins to turn away. “Maybe they’ll find something that can explain what’s going on.”

Jack doubts it, but even so, he’s grateful for his help. “Thank you.” He says, biting at his lip. “Let me know the second you get the results back.”

“I will.”

Jack watches as he begins to walk away, thoughts racing, wondering what to do. Thatcher’s halfway down the hall when he suddenly calls out. “Dr. Thatcher!”

Thatcher glances over his shoulder at him. “Yes?” He asks, sounding wary.

“Would it be alright if I brought in a doctor of my own?” He asks. “For a second opinion?”

Thatcher blinks at that. Jack can’t tell if he’s offended or just simply surprised by his request. “If you have a doctor or specialist that you believe could help him, you’re more than welcome to bring them in.” Dr. Thatcher finally says. “I just need to let the charge nurse know what’s happening.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Jack says, relieved. “I appreciate it.”

He waits until Thatcher’s out of earshot before he looks at Beverly. “Call Dr. Bloom.” He tells her. “She specializes in trauma - let her know what’s going on and tell her to get down here as soon as possible.”

“Jack, it’s one o’clock in the morning-”

“I don’t care. Leave a message if you have to. Just make sure she understands what’s happening.”

Beverly heaves a sigh. “Okay.” She mutters before she turns and takes a couple steps away from him.

Once Jack sees her pull out her phone, he then turns back to Price and Zeller. “Take the samples we collected back to the lab.” He tells them. “Run every test you can think of - text me the results the *second* that you have them.”

“You got it!” They both chirp in unison before they gather up the different bags and begin to move away. No sooner are they gone that Beverly is back.

“Dr. Bloom didn’t answer, so I just left her a message like you said.” She tells him, slipping her phone inside her jacket pocket. “And I told her to call you as soon as she could.”

“Good.” Jack says, nodding.

“Do you want me to go with Price and Zeller?”

“No, I want you to stay with me.” Jack tells her, motioning for her to follow him. “We’re gonna find out where they’re taking Will and then we’re gonna ask the staff if we can set up a room as close to his as possible.”

“Jack, this is a hospital-”

“I don’t care.” Jack tells her. “I’ll take a broom closet if I have to - we’re not gonna let this son-of-a-bitch get away with this. Not this time. This time, we’re gonna catch him.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

I hope you liked it!

See you soon!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Disclaimer: I am not a doctor, and I have no idea how different psychological conditions work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alana arrives a few hours later, and comes sprinting through the ER entrance, her eyes wide and face pale. Her usual silky waves are thrown back into a messy bun and her dress is badly wrinkled. When he sees her, Jack's first thought is that she's getting sick, but then he quickly realizes that she's just foregone her makeup.

"I came as quickly as I could." She tells him breathlessly, her expression tight with worry. "Where is he? Is he alright? What's happened?"

"We don't know." Jack tells her as he leads her down the hall. "We've already spoken to the police officers who found him, but they really couldn't tell us very much."

"Where did they find him?"

"Little town about twenty minutes from here called Wolf Trap. Said he was wandering around on some backroad, half-naked. Someone saw him and called the cops. They thought he might have been on drugs."

"How was he when they found him? Was he alright? Could he talk?"

"They say he seemed a bit disoriented, but overall okay." Jack says as they step inside an elevator. "Couldn't tell them how he got there. Didn't say much on the ride over to the hospital."

“He was probably in shock. Poor thing. He’s lucky he didn’t have hypothermia.” Alana frets, pushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “What about when you arrived? Did he say anything then?”

“Not really. We didn’t get a chance to ask him very much before he, well…I don’t know what to call it.”

“Beverly said he was dissociating? That he wasn’t responding to anything?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“But what caused it? What happened?” Alana presses him as the elevator doors spring open. She sighs when she sees the different agents he has stationed up and down the floor. “A bit much, don’t you think, Jack?”

“The Ripper’s still out there somewhere.” Jack reminds her darkly. “We don’t know why he’s let Will go.”

“Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he escaped.”

“I think that’s pretty unlikely, all things considered.” Jack mutters to himself. Alana turns her head just enough to study him from the corner of her vision.

“Jack, what exactly happened? What did Will say before he dissociated?”

Jack hesitates. “He said he couldn’t remember anything.”

Alana stares at him, blue eyes wide with shock. “He doesn’t remember?” She echoes softly. “What?”

“The last thing he remembers was the morning that he disappeared.” Jack tells her. “When I brought him to the last Ripper scene.” He glances at her. “Any idea what could have caused that?”

Alana bites her lip. “Trauma to the head?” She suggests. “It could affect short-term memory.”

“That’s what the ER doctor thought too, but Will’s had just about every kind of scan you can think of - MRI, CT scan, X-ray - and so far, they’ve all come back normal. No sign of any head injury.”

“It might be dissociative amnesia - it’s rare, but it usually occurs from an extremely traumatic experience. The brain is trying to protect itself by repressing memories of the event.” She chews her lip, considering. “Fugue states are also common.” She adds, almost as an afterthought.

“That’s what I think it is.” Jack says with a nod as they finally come to a stop before a heavy, blonde-wood door. “Which is why I called you. This is your area of expertise, after all. Repressed memories can be recovered, can’t they?”

“Yes.” She says hesitantly, glancing at Will's door. “But you need to understand that these things take *time* , Jack - it could take weeks, or maybe *months* , of therapy before Will finally snaps out of it, and even longer for him to recover his memories.”

“I know that.” Jack tells her, and he does, but even so, with every second that passes, it feels as if the Ripper is only slipping further and further away. “But the sooner we get started, the better. For Will’s sake.”

Alana doesn’t answer him at first, and though she’s doing everything she can to keep her expression blank, Jack has the impression she knows Will isn’t his priority. She shifts a little, and Jacks relieved when she finally looks away.

“Is Will in there?” She asks, nodding at the door. Jack nods back, and when he does, she heaves a sigh, hefting the bag she’s carrying a little higher on her shoulder. “Alright.” She says before she squares her shoulders. “Let’s go.”

Jack gets the door for her, and ushers her quietly inside. The lights are dim - only the ones above Will’s bed are on, and the curtains have been drawn, as though the nurses are doing everything they can to try and encourage Will to sleep. Atop the bed, Will lies exactly as Jack last left him, staring at the ceiling tile through unfocused, slowly blinking eyes.

“Will?” Jack calls softly to him. “Will, Dr. Bloom is here to see you. You remember Dr. Bloom, don’t you?”

“Hey, Will.” Alana adds, voice watery and wet and she slowly approaches the bed. “It’s good to see you again - I’m so glad that you’re okay!”

But Will does not respond to them in any way. They wait a moment, giving him the chance to speak, acknowledge them somehow, but Will remains unmoving, statuesque, with wires snaking underneath his gown. The monitor that’s mounted on the wall beside him seems lively in comparison, with its steady beeping and the pulsing line of the ECG strip.

“Will?” Alana tries again after several uneventful moments pass. “Can you hear me?”

Will doesn’t move at all. If it weren’t for the monitor assuring him he wasn’t, Jack would think that he was dead.

Alana heaves a tiny sigh. “I’d like to speak with him alone, Jack.” She tells him quietly. “I don’t want there to be any…distractions.”

“Of course.” Jack tells her graciously, relieved as he turns back to the door. “Whatever you need, Dr. Bloom.”

“Thank you.” She says before he slips outside.The door closes firmly behind him, and Jack leans against it with a sigh, rubbing at his eyes.

He’s been awake for hours, waiting anxiously for news that doesn’t seem to want to come. So far, Price and Zeller haven’t found anything, and all Will’s tests have come back normal. The whole thing is frustratingly sinister, and Jack has the anxious, sinking feeling that the Ripper might just slip through his fingers - *again* - once and for all.

Time seems to stretch, and Jack comes close to dozing off…

“Hey, Jack!”

Jack turns and sees that Beverly is jogging toward him, her tablet in her hands.

“What is it, Beverly?” He asks, swallowing another sigh. He never knows what to expect from her - if whatever she’s about to say is a bad joke or something of earth-shattering importance, but the possibility of either seems especially high given everything that’s happened.

“I was looking over the results of Will’s blood tests just now,” She tells him as she comes to stop beside him. “And I noticed something strange.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asks her. “Thatcher didn’t find anything unusual with Will’s blood.”

“But he should have - look!” She thrusts her tablet in Jack’s hands, and he sees she’s pulled Will’s Academy records. “This is a copy of Will’s incoming physical exam at the Academy. All new recruits are required to have one.”

“Yes, Beverly, I’m aware.” Jack says, frowning at the notes.

“Look at his blood panel.” She says, tapping at the numbers on the screen. “Will had iron-deficiency anemia. It’s a condition when the body isn’t producing enough red blood cells.”

“I know what anemia is, Beverly.” Jack growls at her in warning. “What I don’t see is what this has to do with anything.”

“Iron-deficiency anemia usually occurs because someone isn’t getting enough iron in their diet.” Beverly explains. “Which means that the condition is reversible - all they need’s a little extra red meat.”

It begins to slowly dawn on Jack what she’s saying. “Will’s iron levels were normal when Thatcher tested them.” He murmurs quietly to himself.

“And that’s not all.” Beverly goes on, scrolling to the next page of Will’s report. “During his physical exam, Will was noted to have an irregular heartbeat and tachycardia, both of which could also occur because of the anemia. But when Dr. Thatcher checked his heart, it was normal. And look, look - when he first came to the Academy, Will only weighed a hundred and twenty-two pounds - his BMI was eighteen, Jack. He was considered malnourished at the time. But last night-!”

“Last night they said he was one thirty.” Jack says slowly. “Which would mean his BMI is now on the lower end of normal.” His eyes narrow. “Beverly - are you saying that Will is… *better* since the Ripper took him?”

“Looks that way.” Beverly says with a shrug.

“But that doesn’t make any sense.” Jack growls, shaking his head. “We’re talking about someone who cut a man down the middle and then placed his two halves so that they were facing each other on a bus. Why on *earth* would he give a damn if Will was healthy?”

“He is a doctor, isn’t he?” Beverly says. “Maybe that has something to do with it.”

“No, he’s a sadist.” Jack insists. “We know he is - he would have wanted Will to suffer.”

“Jack, I have no idea why he did what he did.” Beverly tells him. She sounds exhausted. “I just thought you should know.”

Jack forces himself to take a breath. “Thank you, Beverly.” He tells her. “Good work.”

“Have you heard anything from Alana?” She asks him. “Is she coming soon?”

“She’s in there with Will now.” Jack says, nodding at the door. “Hopefully, she -”

But before he can say anything else, Will’s door suddenly opens behind him. Jack turns just as Alana steps outside.

“You weren’t in there long.” He says, heart sinking in his chest. “Only half-an-hour at the most-”

“I don’t know what’s wrong.” Alana confesses in a rush, sounding close to tears. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. Jack, he’s completely unresponsive.”

“I know-”

“I tried *everything* ! He wouldn’t even look at me. Jack, what *happened* to him?”

“We’re not sure.” Jack tells her. “He was very upset during the exam. Dr. Thatcher thinks this may be some kind of trauma response.”

“If that’s the case, this is the most severe case I’ve ever seen.” Alana tells him. “There’s no way it…” She trails off then, and Jack knows from the expression on her face he’s not going

to like whatever she's about to say.

"What is it?"

She hesitates. "What if…what if this isn't trauma induced?" She says, more to herself than to Jack. "What if…what if this is just Will's empathy?"

"What do you mean?" Jack asks her sharply. "What does his empathy have to do with anything?"

Alana swallows. "You know most people with Hyper Empathetic Disorder often suffer from dissociative states." She reminds him. "Most of them have undergone at least one episode before their twentieth birthday. What if…what if this is just that? What if it's just Will's empathy?"

Jack stares at her in horror. "But if that were the case," He says slowly, "That would mean-"

"That there's nothing we can do to help him." Alana finishes for him. "I know."

Ringing silence meets these words, as the three of them stand staring at Will's door. After what feels like forever, Alana heaves a sigh.

"Jack." She says, her voice soft. "Behavioral disorders aren't really my specialty. It might be better if we bring in someone else."

"Someone else?" Jack asks her weakly, trying not to feel defeated and feeling like he's failing miserably. "Like who?"

+++

It's about an hour's drive from Baltimore to Fairfax, Virginia, and when Hannibal finally arrives, Jack is waiting for him outside the main entrance of the Inova Emergency room. He looks nothing short of relieved when he sees Hannibal unfold himself from the glossy Bentley, and meets him halfway across the parking lot with his hand outstretched.

"Dr. Lecter!" He breathes, grasping almost frantically at Hannibal's. "I'm so glad you could come!"

He looks awful - there are heavy bags beneath his eyes, and a fine dusting of day-old stubble on his cheeks and chin. His suit is badly rumpled, and his tie hangs loose around his neck. Hannibal has never seen Jack so unkempt, and if he were capable of such a thing, he might have been concerned.

Instead, he swallows back a smirk.

"Jack." He greets him warmly, squeezing Jack's hand briefly in his own before he pulls away. "Is it true? Have you found Will?"

"We have." Jack says as he leads him through the hospital's automatic doors. As they step inside, Hannibal is immediately met with the overwhelmingly familiar stench of antiseptic, beneath which lies the fainter, sweeter smell of blood.

"How is he?" He asks Jack, and spares the overcrowded waiting room a glance, watching as nurses and EMTs scramble back and forth from one disaster to another. "Is he alright?"

"Physically, he's fine." Jack assures him as he guides him through the halls and over to the elevator. "They've run every test twice and can't find anything wrong with him."

"And mentally?"

Jack hesitates. Heaves a tiny sigh. "Mentally, I'd say he's about as far from 'alright' as a person can possibly be."

“He was held captive by a serial killer for months, Jack.” Hannibal reminds him quietly as they step inside the elevator. “I’d be surprised if he wasn’t.”

Jack shakes his head. “It’s more than just that.” He mutters, more to himself than to Hannibal.

“What do you mean?”

Jack doesn’t answer him at first. He waits until they’ve reached their floor and have left the crowded elevator.

“I…I think I’ve finally broken him, Dr. Lecter.” He says at last, so quietly that Hannibal almost doesn’t hear him. “He hasn’t…he hasn’t spoken since the night that we first found him.”

“He’s probably still in shock, Jack.”

Jack shakes his head again. “I think that’s only part of it, Doctor.”

Hannibal can practically smell the sour stench of Jack’s guilt as he leads him down the hall. He’s puzzled, wondering what he means, and what he’s done, but decides better than to push him for an answer now. He glances curiously at the various men in black suits stationed at nearly every corner of the floor.

“Are you worried about the Ripper coming back for him?” He asks, amused that Jack would go to such great lengths to keep Will from the Ripper without ever even realizing that he’s personally invited him in.

That he practically held the door open for him and begged he stepped inside.

“At this point, I’m more concerned about Freddie Lounds than the Ripper.” Jack tells him bitterly, coming to a stop at last beside a door at the end of the hall. “We’ve caught her trying to sneak in twice - the last thing I want is for her to see the kid when he’s like this.”

It’s the last thing Hannibal wants too. As Jack ushers him through the door and into Will’s room, he contemplates the benefits and risks of killing Ms. Lounds while he has the chance, and wonders if Jack will be suspicious if he invites him to a dinner party where he’d be serving tongue…

He doubts it, if past experience is anything to go by, and as tempting as it is, the thought evaporates the moment Hannibal steps into the room.

There’s a nurse standing at the side of the bed, checking Will’s vitals and completely blocking Hannibal’s view of him. Sitting nearby is Alana, and when she catches sight of Hannibal, she rises to her feet.

“Oh, Hannibal!” She gasps, and all but throws herself in his arms. “Oh, thank God you’re here!”

“Hello, Alana.” He says, pushing aside a sharp flare of annoyance at her dramatics. “It’s good to see you again. Though I wish it were under better circumstances.”

Alana sniffles as she finally pulls away. “Jack’s told you what happened?” She asks him, wiping at her eyes. Her voice is soft, as though she doesn’t want Will to overhear them. “What’s wrong?”

“He told me Will was dissociating.” Hannibal tells her, matching her low tone. “And that you thought it might be related to his empathy. But not much beyond that.”

Alana shoots Jack an exasperated look over his shoulder as Hannibal tries to crane his head to get a better look at Will. All he can see is his hand lying limply on the bed, encircled by a hospital bracelet and adorned with a bulky pulse oximeter on his finger.

“-completely unresponsive.” He hears Alana say as though from a great distance, and her words pull him abruptly from his musings. He blinks, and turns to look at her more fully. “I’ve tried everything, but nothing seems to be helping.”

Hannibal frowns at that. “Will isn’t responding to you?” He asks her. “At all?”

“He’s not responding to anyone.” Alana tells him, shaking her head. “Or anything. Not even pain - the nurses had to prick his finger a couple times to check his blood sugar and he didn’t even blink.”

Hannibal’s frown deepens.

There’s a ringing in his ears.

This wasn’t the plan.

This wasn’t…

“I don’t understand.” He says after a moment, glancing over at Jack, who’s avoiding his eyes. “What exactly happened?”

Jack chews his lip, shoulders slumping slightly.

“Will was picked up by local police last night a little after eleven thirty.” He tells him. “They found him wandering in the middle of a road, barefoot and dressed only in his underwear. They said that he seemed confused, and that he apparently didn’t know where he was or how he got there. They recognized his name, and phoned us, letting us know they found him. We told them to take him to the nearest hospital, but that it was of utmost importance that the hospital staff avoided touching him unless absolutely necessary. We were worried about them contaminating any evidence he might have had on him.”

“But he was speaking to the police when they found him?” Hannibal asks.

“A little.” Jack tells him. “Apparently he didn’t have much to say.”

“Was he still speaking when you and your team arrived?”

“He was at first.” Jack tells him, shaking his head. “He thought that he was in trouble.”

“Why?”

“Because trainees are forbidden from leaving the campus unless they’re given express permission to do so.” Jack explains. “Will didn’t…” He hesitates, then heaves a sigh. “Will said he didn’t remember what had happened to him.” He says. “About the Ripper, about being taken by him, about anything. It was as if the past few months had never happened.”

“What’s the last thing he remembers?”

“Going to see the Ripper’s last tableau with me.” Jack says. “Which was November 17th.”

Hannibal pretends to contemplate this for a moment. “Memory loss can occur for a number of reasons.” He says at last. “Head trauma for one, but if that were the case, there would be physical evidence of some kind, and you’ve already told me that there isn’t any. It could be psychological - the brain will often suppress memories of severe traumatic experiences in an effort to protect itself.”

Alana nods in agreement to that, and Hannibal cocks his head, pursing his lips as though he's only just now thought of something. “It’s possible,” He says slowly, “That it was drug-induced.”

Both Alana and Jack frown at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Will’s memory loss seems far too clean for it to be natural.” Hannibal elaborates. “If the Ripper is a doctor, as we believe him to be, he may have administered some sort of medication to alter Will’s memory.”

Jack blinks, glancing back and forth between Hannibal and Alana.

“Is that even possible?” He asks them.

“It’s possible.” Alana tells him with a frown. “Certain barbiturates combined with hypnosis can induce memory loss. But if that were the case, the Ripper would have to have a highly sophisticated understanding of both the psychotropic drugs and the therapeutic techniques to do so. He’d almost have to be a psychiatrist or a neurologist.”

“A neurologist like Donald Sutcliffe, you mean?”

“ *Enough* about Sutcliffe, Jack.” Alana groans as the nurse behind her moves away from Will’s bed at last.“You’ve been investigating him for months, and you have found a thing.”

“If he is the Ripper, then I wouldn’t.”

“Sutcliffe’s not the Ripper.” Alana tells him firmly. “You would have found *something* by now if he was.”

“While I agree that a neurologist is possible,” Hannibal adds, and has to force himself not to rush immediately to Will’s side, to avoid looking at him at all. “I would argue that a psychiatrist is more likely, given the circumstances. Though this is, of course, just speculation.” He says with a shrug as the nurse turns and moves hesitantly toward them, her

mouth set in a hard line and her stethoscope draped carefully around her neck. Alana seems to stiffen when she catches sight of her expression.

“How is he?” She asks, sounding worried, glancing anxiously at Will.

“The same.” The nurse tells her with a sigh. “Poor thing. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Neither have I.” Alana tells her, looking over her shoulder at Hannibal. “Hannibal, have you?”

“Not to the level you’re describing.” Hannibal says, swallowing down another flare of frustration. “But perhaps I’d have a better sense of what’s happening if I examined him myself.”

“Oh, of course!” Alana says, blushing slightly before turning her attention to the nurse. “Would it be alright if Dr. Lecter had a look at him?”

“Absolutely.” The nurse - Shauna, Hannibal sees from her badge - assures her with a smile. “That’s everything I needed for now.”

“Thank you.” Alana tells her as she leaves the room. She still looks slightly embarrassed. “Hannibal, is there anything you need?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Alright.” Alana says, as she and Jack press themselves into the corner. “Just let us know if there’s anything we can do to help.”

Hannibal highly doubts there is, but nods politely all the same. His hands are shaking slightly with excitement as he approaches Will’s bedside. He leans carefully over the rails, gazing down at him.

Will looks so small, tangled up between the bedsheets and the wires. They've dressed him in a hospital gown, which they've left untied and folded down, exposing the various leads that are plastered to his chest. There's an IV in his arm, pumping him with fluids, and the monitor beeps steady at his side. Will stares blankly at the ceiling, blue eyes hazy and unfocused, and doesn't seem aware of Hannibal at all.

Hannibal frowns, torn between concern and fury.

This wasn't the plan.

This wasn't what he planned at all.

This wasn't what was supposed to happen…

He swallows thickly, and reaches out to gently clasp Will's hand.

"Hello, Will." He says, his voice soft. "Do you remember me?"

He waits, but all he gets back is a blink.

Hannibal feels a small and sudden stab of fear, and his grip around Will tightens.

"I'm so glad you've been found." He goes on, forcing himself to sound calm and cheerful despite the fact that he feels anything but. His thumb sweeps back and forth across the back of Will's hand, and Will blinks again. "We were so worried about you."

Another blink is all he gets, but it seems that Will is blinking faster now than he was before, and Hannibal clings to this belief with everything he has.

“Agent Crawford is working very hard to keep you safe, Will. He has agents stationed every six feet along the entire floor and two at every major entrance in the building.” He tells him, wanting nothing more than to beg him to answer him. “You’re in a hospital. Do you know that? There are many people here who are taking very good care of you.” He pauses then, because he swore he felt Will’s fingers twitch in his. “Dr. Bloom is here too. She and I are going to help you, Will. Everyone is doing everything they can to try and help you. You are *safe,* Will. There’s nothing for you to be afraid of. We only want what’s best for you, and I promise nothing bad is going to happen-”

He trails off then, frowning. For a second, he thought…

His grip around Will tightens as his eyes drift slowly over to Hannibal’s face. Will blinks again, staring up at him.

“Will?” Hannibal asks him, voice barely more than a whisper. Behind him, he can hear Jack and Alana shuffle hesitantly closer. “Will, can you hear me?”

There’s no doubt that Will is looking at him - *really* looking at him - as he lies unmoving on the bed, drinking in the details of Hannibal’s face.

“Will.” Hannibal calls again, more insistently this time. “Will, are you alright? Will. Will, can you answer me?”

“Will, it’s alright.” Alana chimes in tearfully from Hannibal’s side, staring down at him. “Everything’s alright - you’re alright. Please, Will, talk to us.”

But Will ignores her. Instead his gaze remains completely fixed on Hannibal.

“Will.” Hannibal breathes, leaning further down, closer to him. “Talk to me, Will. *Please* .”

Will doesn't answer him. Instead, he very slowly lifts his arms, like a child asking to be picked up. Hannibal blinks back at him, surprised.

"Will?" Hannibal asks, half bent across the bed. "What is it, Will? What's wrong?"

Will whimpers, eyes suspiciously wet, and when Hannibal leans close enough, he grabs him suddenly, hooking his arms around his neck and nearly pulling him down onto the bed.

"Woah, woah, woah!" Jack says, grabbing Hannibal before he can go tumbling over the rails. "Will!"

Will acts as though he doesn't hear him, still staring up at Hannibal and clawing at him desperately, trying to tug him closer.

"Will. Will, honey, let go." Alana says, gently prying Will's fingers from where they're locked around Hannibal's shoulders. "You're hurting Dr. Lecter, Will."

Let him hurt me . Hannibal thinks, wanting nothing more than to rip her fingers from Will's wrists. *Let him tear me apart and drown me in his cruel desires. I'll submit to every passing whim - I'm his* .

It's infuriating, allowing himself to be dragged away, but Hannibal knows he can't appear too eager - as far as anybody knows, he and Will have only ever spoken once. If this is going to work, they need to maintain a certain level of distance from each other. It would look suspicious if they seemed to know each other well…

Will, it seems, has other plans.

When Alana finally pulls him free, Will lets out a single, ear-piercing shriek, and then sits bolt upright on the bed, chasing after Haninibal, hands scratching at the tubes and wires that tie him to the bed.

“Will, stop!” Jack cries, grabbing at him. “You’re gonna hurt yourself!”

In the confusion, the leads detach, and in response, the monitor begins to scream, convinced that Will is flatlining. Hannibal bites back a groan as the door flies open, panicked nurses spilling in the room.

“He’s alright.” He tries to tell them even as they push him forcefully aside. “He’s just pulled off the lead-”

They don’t listen, of course, even when they see that Will is clearly fine, trying to climb down from the bed, hands still outstretched to Hannibal.

“No, Will, don’t do that!” Says the nurse Hannibal recognizes from before - Shauna. “Will, you need to lie down…oh, sweetie, you’ve torn your IV-”

She folds Will gently in her arms, shushing him, even as Will whimpers and tries frantically to squirm away. Shauna follows the direction of Will’s gaze, and frowns when she sees Hannibal.

“What happened?” She demands, still trying hard to coax Will back to bed. “Why is he so upset?”

“He grabbed Hannibal.” Alana explains, watching anxiously as Will grasps weakly at the air for Hannibal. “He almost pulled him down over the bed. When we wouldn’t let him, he tried to get up.”

Shauna frowns at this, glancing down at Will before looking back at Hannibal.

“Well?” She huffs at him, sounding frustrated. “Can’t you see he wants you? Come over here and hold his hand while I take care of his IV.”

Hannibal pretends to hesitate, and then does as she says, moving slowly back across the room to Will. Will watches, hands flapping excitedly, soft sounds tumbling from his lips as Hannibal approaches. When he's close, Will rises shakily to his knees and once more throws his arms around Hannibal's neck, burying his nose against the hollow of his throat.

Hannibal grunts, adjusting himself to better hold Will's weight. "Will."

"Hannibal, if he's hurting you-"

"He's not." Hannibal assures Alana quickly, annoyed she's interrupting them again. "I just don't want him to fall."

"Here." Shauna says, and gently guides Will's legs so that he's no longer kneeling on the bed but lying down on top of it. "There we go. That's got to feel better, doesn't it, sweetie?"

Will doesn't answer her. He's shaking in Hannibal's arms, clinging to him tight as Shauna cleans his bloodied arm and reattaches all his leads.

"He sure seems pretty attached to you, hun." Shauna says as she turns away from Will at last.

"I don't know why." Hannibal tells her, and when he shifts a little, Will cries out in protest. His grip is bordering on painful, but Hannibal doesn't dare to try and break it. "He's only met me once."

Shauna shrugs. "Well, clearly, he feels safe with you." Is all she says before she looks at Jack. "I'm gonna go get Dr. Thatcher." She tells him. "He'll probably wanna run some more tests, now that Will's responsive. Ish."

“Please do.” Jack tells her with a nod, frowning as he studies Hannibal and Will entwined together. “I’m curious to see if anything has changed.”

Shauna spares Hannibal another glance. She seems mightily amused to see him bent at such an awkward angle in an effort to try and keep Will happy. “Would you like me to lower the railing for you, hun?” She asks him. “I think you’d be more comfortable if you were sitting down.”

“Please.” Hannibal says, grateful, as she reaches in between him to fold the railing back. As soon as it’s down, he then carefully lowers himself to sit beside Will on the bed.

The moment that he does, Will sits up again, and tries to crawl into his lap.

“Will.” Hannibal says, exasperated, as both Jack and Shauna tug him back. “It’s alright. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. Shh.”

“Oh, this is *not* gonna go over well when visiting hours are over.” He hears Shauna mutter as she turns and leaves the room.

Hannibal can’t help but think she’s right.

The thought of it delights him.

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When he sees that Will is upright, and that his eyes are tracking every little move Hannibal makes, Dr. Thatcher immediately tries to examine him, only to realize in the next instant that it’s not going to happen - the moment that Hannibal attempts to pull away, Will begins to wail, distraught, and refuses to cooperate with anyone at all. He only calms again when Hannibal agrees to hold his hand, and even then, it’s as though the others don’t exist - he doesn’t react to any stimulus that he’s presented, and doesn’t answer any of their questions.

He simply sits and stares at Hannibal, never speaking, only blinking, and every so often he tries to worm his way into his arms.

"I've never seen anything like this." Thatcher tells them, scratching at his balding head. "I don't even know what to call it."

Neither does Hannibal, though he's convinced it's something psychological in nature. And while Thatcher agrees, he decides he needs another round of brain scans to confirm it.

Will, however, disagrees. The moment Hannibal moves away so that Shauna can help load him in a wheelchair, he begins to cry hysterically.

In the end, poor Will needs to be sedated, and it's only once he's faded unwillingly to sleep that Hannibal lifts his limp and slumping figure from the wheelchair to the gurney. He watches Shauna as straps him down, and then follows close behind her as she wheels him from the room, Jack and Alana following on either side. The three of them watch silently as Will then disappears inside the elevator, his body flanked by nearly half a dozen federal agents. It's only once the doors slide shut that Hannibal turns back to the others.

Alana looks irritatingly close to tears, but Jack remains unmoved, scowling at the elevator doors.

"He's lost it." He mutters.

"He has *not!* " Alana snaps, rounding on him with a glare. "You saw how well he responded to Hannibal -!"

"He didn't do anything but cling to him and cry, Alana." Jack growls. "I'd hardly call that an improvement."

"You can't expect him to recover in a *day* , Jack! I told you these things take time!"

“Time that we don’t have! The emergency room isn’t going to keep him forever, Alana, they need the bed. Thatcher’s already talking about transferring to a long-term psychiatric ward-”

“Well, maybe that’s what’s best for Will right now.” Alana argues with a frown. “He doesn’t need to be poked and prodded, Jack, what he needs is a safe space where he can heal-”

“I doubt he’ll *ever* feel safe if the Ripper is still out there-!”

“Except that’s not entirely true, is it?” Hannibal asks, frowning at him, and immediately, Jack and Alana fall silent.

Jack hesitates. “What do you mean?” He says, glaring at him.

“You said that when you got here, Will didn’t know where he was or how he got there.” Hannibal reminds him. “You said he thought it was November.”

“Yes.” Jack says slowly, his voice pitched low as if it is a warning. “He did.”

“So he was talking and responsive at first.” Hannibal says. “He was answering your questions.”

Jack seems to stiffen at that. “What’s your point, doctor?”

“I’m wondering what changed.” Hannibal tells him, still frowning. “Clearly something happened *after* you arrived, Jack.” He cocks his head. “So what was it?”

Jack scowls at him a moment longer, and then straightens to his full height. “After we arrived and questioned him about what happened.” He says, gazing at Hannibal coldly. “Will underwent a forensic exam.”

Hannibal meets his gaze unflinchingly. “Was it a *voluntary* forensic exam?”

“It’s standard procedure-”

“That’s not what I’m asking, Jack.” Hannibal says, tone hardening. “I’m asking if Will was given any choice in undergoing the exam.”

Alana looks sharply over at him, staring at Jack with wide, horrified eyes.

Jack pointedly ignores her.

He glares at Hannibal a moment longer, and then he heaves a sigh.

“No.” He says after a moment.

Alana gasps at that, and Hannibal’s eyes slip very briefly shut, trying to contain the sudden, murderous rage that overtakes him.

No wonder Will was traumatized - after everything that he’d been through, considering the fact that he had been routinely abandoned by his father to the care of different mental hospitals for days at a time at such a tender age and subjected to only God knew what while he was there, no wonder he retreated inward and away.

If Jack hadn’t pushed him…

Hannibal wonders if there was any way he could incorporate Jack’s bullying fists into a meal.

“Oh, Jack, you *didn't* !” Alana’s voice is shrill with righteous indignation, and brings Hannibal abruptly back to earth. “How could you do that to him?!”

“I did what I had to do.” Jack snaps at her. “I was trying to catch the monster who had taken him! I never intended for Will to get hurt!”

“Regardless,” Hannibal tells him coolly. “That’s what happened.” He pauses for a moment, allowing Jack to consider what he’s saying. “You owe him, Jack. Whatever it takes to make this right, you’ll do it.”

“I know.” Jack tells him, shoulders slumping slightly. “Believe I know. And I’m going to do everything I can to make this right. Which is why I’ve already spoken to Dr. Chilton about Will-”

“Chilton?!” Alana echoes disbelievingly. “What on earth for?”

“The ER is going to move Will to a psych ward in a day or two, Alana.” Jack reminds her. “If we can get Will transferred to Chilton’s care, he’s promised he’ll be given special privileges.”

“You want to put Will in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane?!” Alana shrieks. “Have you lost your mind?! That’s the *last* place Will should be!”

“Dr. Chilton has guaranteed that he’ll keep Will in a separate, private wing.” Jack tells her. “He’ll be under his personal care and we’ll get to see him whenever and however long we want. Really, this is the best option for everyone.”

“No, it’s what’s best for you!” Alana argues, sounding nothing short of disgusted. “This isn’t about Will at all-”

Beside her, Hannibal is quiet.

While things are moving much faster than he had originally planned, he could very well make it work to his advantage…

"-very bad idea. Hannibal?"

Hannibal glances over at her. "Jack has the look of a man with no interest in any opinion but his own." He says lightly. "I doubt that either one of us is going to change his mind."

"No, you are not." Jack tells them firmly. "I've already spoken to Dr. Chilton. He's coming down tomorrow to observe Will for himself, and then we'll be arranging transport for him back to Baltimore. I suggest that you both make your peace with that."

Chapter End Notes

Gettin' close to the end!

My goal is to have the final chapter posted before the 8th - I'm pretty sure I'm going to meet my deadline!

Thanks so much for reading - I hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frederick Chilton is, if nothing else, a self-loathing idiot, a man who's ruled by insecurity and the driving need to convince the world around him that he's everything he's not. He's amusing on his best days and insufferable on his worst, and after an hour-long commute to Baltimore (a good portion of which was spent sitting in rush-hour traffic), the day seems further tipped toward bad then good...

But still, Hannibal has use for him.

Idiot though he may be, he is a useful one, at least, and Hannibal can tolerate him for an hour if it means ultimately getting what he wants.

That being said, it still takes everything Hannibal has not to stab him through the throat the moment he first sees the irritatingly smug look on Fredrick Chilton's face.

"Ah! Hannibal!" He says with an oily smirk as he pulls his front door open. "I was wondering where you were. Please, come in!"

"Thank you, Frederick." Hannibal says coolly as he steps into his foyer, a bottle of wine cradled in one arm. His other hand is wrapped around the handle of his Gladstone bag. "It's good to see you again."

"And you as well." Like Hannibal, he's dressed in his suit, but his is neither custom-made, nor stylish. It suits him well. "Though I must admit, I was surprised to get your call - it's rare that you insist on anything on such short notice."

"I would apologize." Hannibal tells him as Chilton ushers him down the hall and to his dining room. His home is large to the point of being excessive for a single man, and

contemporary to a fault - in short, it's hideous. "But I'm afraid this couldn't wait."

Chilton's lip twitches into something that's not quite a sneer, but close, as he gestures for Hannibal to take his seat. Waiting for them on the table are two carryout orders from The Capital Grille, laid out on ornate Wedgewood china. It seems comically out of place amidst the glass and sleek lines of the furniture. "I take it this is about Will Graham."

"It is." Hannibal tells him as he lowers himself gracefully into his chair. Once he's seated, he sets his Gladstone bag beside him at his feet, and while normally he would consider this an unforgivable lapse of Chilton's duty as a host, tonight he's glad he hasn't asked to take it for him.

"You've seen him, then?" Chilton asks, and despite how hard he tries, he can't quite hide that he is bitter of this fact.

"I have."

"How is he?" Chilton asks as he takes his seat. Hannibal hands him the bottle of wine, which he accepts with neither comment nor thanks. "Is he really as bad as Jack Crawford says he is? Because from the way he talks, it sounds like he expects Will to spend the rest of his life locked in a padded cell somewhere. Watching the diaper carts go by."

Hannibal frowns. "While it is severe," He says slowly. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that."

"No?" Chilton smirks and pours them each a glass of wine. "I've gotten to know Jack fairly well over the years, and in my experience, it's not often he exaggerates. And from what he tells me, Will Graham has finally lost his mind."

"Will's mind isn't lost." Hannibal insists, frown deepening as he accepts the glass he's offered. "It's just simply overwhelmed at the moment. I'm sure it will be back in no time, and will be every bit as formidable as it always was."

“I’m surprised - I never realized you were such an optimist.”

“To a fault.” Hannibal tells him with a little smile. “But right now, I’d argue that I’m really more of a realist.”

“Jack Crawford is a realist. To the point of being bleak. Either way, it’s such a shame.” Chilton says, with the air he wasn’t entirely paying attention to what Hannibal said. “That such a bright mind be reduced to a mere shadow of its former self.”

“Especially if you were hoping to use that mind to study an extremely rare psychological condition and then publish the results of that study for your own personal gain.”

Across from him, Dr. Chilton goes very, very still. He glances hesitantly up at Hannibal, mouth full of half-chewed food. He swallows thickly after several moments pass. “I can care for Will and still make observations about him.” He says, his tone harder than it was before. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“I’m not saying there is.”

Chilton blinks. “You’re not?”

“No.” Hannibal tells him. “On the contrary, Frederick, I envy you this opportunity.”

“You do?”

“Oh, yes.” Hannibal assured him with a nod. “Personality and behavioral conditions are my specialty, after all, and there’s so little known when it comes to Hyper Empathetic Disorder. I can only imagine the praise and recognition you’ll receive once you’ve had the chance to study Will properly.”

Chilton all but preens are these words. “Yes, well.” He says, looking mightily pleased with himself. “While I admit the accolades I’ll no doubt receive are attractive, I’m far more concerned with the *academic* benefit of my work.”

“Of course.” Hannibal says, dipping his head.

“There’s quite a lot of work to be done.” Chilton goes on, and fussily cuts a bite of his steak. “As you said before, there’s so little that’s known about Hyper Empathetic Disorder and so many questions that need answers. I’m sure that I could spend years studying him, and even then, I would only barely scratch the surface. I suppose,” He then adds slowly, glancing up at Hannibal, “That I could use some help. If you were ever interested.”

Hannibal pretends to look surprised. “You would really allow me to test him?” He asks. “And publish my results?”

“With conditions.” Chiltons sniffs. “I would need to approve any study you intend to conduct, and I’m afraid I must insist that I be listed as a co-author on anything you publish.”

It truly is amazing that so much petty jealousy could exist in so small and singular a space as Frederick Chilton’s body.

“That’s fair.” Hannibal says, trying not to laugh at the absurdity of what he is demanding, and worse, that he actually believes that this is going to happen. “You are his keeper, after all.”

“Not quite yet.” Chilton reminds him. “I still need to convince Jack that the hospital is the best place for him.”

“I don’t think it’s Jack you need to convince.” Hannibal tells him. “I’d be more concerned with Dr. Bloom.”

Chilton snorts. “Please. She has no claim on Will.” He sneers. “What could she possibly do?”

“Quite a bit, if she were so inclined, and I believe she is.” Hannibal says. “Given her line of work, Alana has some rather powerful connections in social services. She could easily file for conservatorship or even report you to the American Psychiatric Association. An investigation would look very bad for you, Frederick, even if nothing came of it.”

Chilton contemplates this for a moment, looking irritated. “And I don’t suppose you have any suggestions as to what I should do to try and win her over?”

“Let me handle Alana.” Hannibal tells him smoothly. “As I’m sure you know, she holds my opinion in very high regard.”

Chilton nods at this. “You’ll be there tomorrow?” He asks him, sounding anxious. “For my assessment of Will?”

“Frederick,” Hannibal tells him gravely, and has to stop himself from grinning. “I wouldn’t miss it for the *world* .”

“Good, good.” Chilton says, distracted, as he swirls his wine. “I’m glad to hear it. If I have any chance of gaining custody of Will, I’m going to need as many people on my side as I can get.”

Hannibal waits until he’s swallowed down a mouthful before he glances round the room. “I must say, I love what you’ve done with your home, Frederick.” He tells him, gazing at the soaring ceilings. “I hardly recognize it from the last time I was here.”

“Thank you.” Chilton tells him, looking pleased. “I’d forgotten you haven’t seen it since before I had it remodeled. I’ll have to show you around after dinner, if you have time.”

“Plenty.” Hannibal assured him, glancing at the Gladstone bag that sits between his feet. It’s completely filled with everything he needs to make sure Will is his. “I’d love to see it.”

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Hannibal wakes early the next morning, before dawn, determined to reach Fairfax as soon as the Innova visitor hours start. He arrives at eight am sharp, and slips quietly past Jack's agents and into Will's room, where Shauna is already hard at work.

"Come on, Will." She murmurs, begging, as she holds a spoon of chocolate pudding to Will's lips. "Come on, sweetie…you've got to eat something."

But Will ignores her, staring miserably at the window, where rain is drumming heavy on the glass.

"How is he?" Hannibal asks her, moving slowly closer. Will is sitting propped against the pillows on his bed, eyes hazy and unfocused, and apparently unaware of either of them. "Is everything alright?"

"We had a rough night, after you left." Shauna tells him with a sigh. "Poor thing barely got any sleep - just spent the whole night wandering around his room, crying. I think he was looking for you."

Hannibal is pleasantly surprised to hear this, and absolutely delighted at the fact that Will has evidently missed him so. He swallows back a smirk, watching as Shauna attempts to feed Will once again.

When the spoon brushes up against his lip, Will turns his head with a whimper.

"Not hungry, Will?" Hannibal calls out gently.

"He has to be." Shauna tells him, shaking her head. "He hasn't eaten anything since he got here."

“Nothing at all?” Hannibal asks her, and can’t help but feel the familiar flare of alarm that comes any time Will isn’t eating.

“No. I’ve tried everything.” Shauna tells him, gesturing at the tray that sits beside her on a nearby Mayo stand, where various containers of soft foods sit untouched and waiting. She heaves another sigh.

“I thought I’d start with dessert first.” She explains, showing Hannibal the chocolate pudding cup she’s holding. “And see if I had any better luck, but so far, nothing.”

She sits back, shaking her head. “They’re gonna have to place a feeding tube, if he doesn’t eat something soon.” She says, biting at her lip. “That’s pretty much the last thing he needs, after everything else he’s been through.”

“I would agree.” Hannibal says, studying the different foods he has to choose from. It seems to consist almost entirely of foods more liquid than solid, things easy to chew and swallow - there’s a bowl of watery oatmeal, scrambled eggs and grits, a cup of yogurt, and-

Hannibal blinks, lips curling faintly in a smile, and then glances back at Shauna.

“Would you mind if I try?” He asks, and Shauna nods before she pulls the spoon back from Will’s lips. Hannibal waits until she’s moved away before he takes the cup of applesauce and peels away the foil lid. There’s a spare spoon on the tray, and he takes this too as he sinks to sit across from Will on the bed.

“Good morning, Will.” He tells him softly, tilting his head to try and catch his eye. “How are you feeling?”

Will doesn’t look at him, he merely blinks, but his lips twist very slightly in a scowl, and Hannibal has to stop himself from laughing.

“I hear you didn’t get much sleep last night.” He tells him, dipping the spoon into the applesauce and swirling it around. “And that you haven’t been eating much since you arrived.

Poor boy, you must be so uncomfortable.”

Will doesn’t answer him, but he’s blinking faster than he was before, and his eyes are very shiny.

“Why don’t we try a couple bites and see how you feel?” Hannibal asks him, lifting up the spoon. “Hmm? Does that sound good to you, Will?”

Will’s scowl deepens when he brushes up against his lips, and very pointedly, Will turns his head away.

Hannibal looks at him, amused. “I take it you’re upset with me?” He asks. “For leaving?”

Will huffs at him, a single tiny exhale of air that barely makes a sound.

Hannibal swallows down a sigh.

“Will.” He says, leaning in close. “I’m sorry that I left you yesterday. I didn’t want to, but I had to - the hospital has very strict visiting hours, and they needed to take care of you.”

But Will ignores him, and continues glaring at the window. Hannibal takes his hand in his, thumb stroking back and forth across his knuckles.

“I’m sorry, Will.” He tells him, his voice soft, wanting nothing more than to cup Will’s cheek but knowing that he can’t. Not while Shauna’s in the room. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be here for you when you needed me. But I’m here now, and I promise, I won't leave again until I absolutely have to.”

Will blinks, and slowly, almost vaguely, his gaze wanders over to meet Hannibal’s. Hannibal smiles at him gently.

“Please, Will.” He begs, his voice soft. “Eat.”

Will doesn’t answer him. Instead, he gazes silently at Hannibal a moment longer, and then he slowly opens his mouth.

Hannibal beams at him. “Good boy.” He whispers as he spoons a bit of applesauce into Will’s waiting mouth. Will swallows the small mouthful, still gazing up at him with wide and frightened eyes, and when Hannibal offers him another, he parts his lips again. Behind him, Hannibal hears Shauna click her tongue.

“Don’t even *think* about leaving before dinner time.” She tells him. “Poor thing can’t afford to miss another meal.”

“Don’t worry.” Hannibal says, feeding Will another spoonful. “I won’t.”

Will eats every bite of applesauce that Hannibal presents him without complaint or issue, and it’s only when he tries to feed him oatmeal that Will finally turns away.

“Come on, Will.” Hannibal murmurs, chasing after him with the spoon. “Just a few more bites.”

Will’s only answer is a whine, and when Hannibal brushes up against his lips, he pushes him away. Hannibal sighs.

“Better than nothing.” Shauna reassures him with a shrug, and moves to take the tray away. “We can try again at lunch.”

Hannibal hands her the little bowl of untouched oatmeal, and it’s only once she leaves that Will begins to fidget, sneaking peeks at Hannibal through the tangles of his hair.

“Are you alright, Will?” Hannibal asks him, making sure to keep his tone as calm and light as possible. “Is there something that you need?”

Will doesn’t speak, and Hannibal doesn’t expect him to, but he is surprised when Will takes his hand in his and begins to weakly tug him closer. Hannibal shifts a little, and when Will whines unhappily, he turns so that he and Will are no longer face-to-face, but sitting side-by-side each other on the bed. It’s only once he’s settled back against the pillows that Will finally lets him go.

“Is this better?” Hannibal asks him, amused, watching as Will squirms until he’s pressed against his side.

He’s shocked a moment later when Will slowly, hesitantly, lays his head against Hannibal’s shoulder with a sigh.

Hannibal stiffens slightly, and then reaches up to lightly stroke his hair. He watches fondly as Will’s eyes begin to flutter shut.

“Go to sleep, Will.” He tells him, nuzzling against him. “Go to sleep. It’s alright - you’re safe. I promise I won’t leave. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

He waits until Will has drifted gently off to sleep before he leans down to press a kiss against the crown of his head.

“And I promise,” He whispers in his ear. “I’m never leaving you again.”

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Jack and Alana arrive a couple hours later. They find Will peacefully asleep upon his bed and Hannibal dozing in the chair beside him, their fingers tangled loosely together. Hannibal glances over at them when they slip quietly inside the room, and offers them a tired smile.

“Good morning, Jack, Alana.” He says, rising stiffly from his seat to greet them. “How are you?”

“Morning, doctor.” Jack answers, clasping Hannibal’s hand in his. “You’re here early.”

“After everything that happened yesterday, I found I couldn’t stay away.” Hannibal tells him before turning his attention to Alana. “I was very worried about poor Will. Hello, Alana.”

“Hello, Hannibal.” She says, kissing him on the cheek. “It’s good to see you again. How’s Will? Any better?”

“It’s hard to say. He was awake for a little while when I first got here.” Hannibal explains, watching as she wanders closer to the bed, smiling at Will’s sleeping figure warmly. “But he’s been sleeping ever since. His nurse said he had a rough night.”

“Did he say anything?” Jack asks him, ignoring Alana’s soft coo of sympathy. “When you first got here, did he say anything to you?”

Hannibal shakes his head, annoyed. “No, nothing.” He tells him. “He seemed the same as he did yesterday.”

“But he’s still responding to you.” It’s not so much a question as it is a demand. “Isn’t he?”

“In a way.” Hannibal says with a shrug. “But as I said before, Jack, there really doesn’t seem to be much change in his condition.”

Jack nods his head. “Good.” He says, much to Hannibal’s disgust. “Once he sees the state Will’s in, Dr. Chilton will see just how serious this is.” As he speaks, he turns to look at Will at last. His face flushes when he sees him. “Um, Alana.” He says, sounding uncomfortable. “He’s, um…”

Hannibal glances back. Will is curled up tightly on his blankets, with his knees tucked close against his middle. His gown is riding up, exposing the diaper that he's wearing underneath. From where she stands beside him, Alana frowns, confused, and glances down at Will. When she sees what Jack is gesturing at, she rolls her eyes.

"Oh, Jack." She snaps, grabbing the spare blanket that lies puddled at Will's feet. "Grow up."

She drapes Will with the blanket, wrapping it carefully around his shoulders, and once he's covered up again, Jack clears his throat.

"Alright. Dr. Chilton should be here in an hour." He says, turning back to look at Hannibal with cheeks still slightly tinted pink. "He wants to examine Will himself as soon as he arrives. I'd like for you to be there in the room when he does, Dr. Lecter - for Will's sake, of course, but also so that Dr. Chilton sees just how well that he responds to you. It's important that he understands the…situation at hand."

"Of course, Jack." Hannibal says cheerfully, delighted at the thought of what's to come. "I'd be happy to help."

Behind him, Alana huffs.

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Will wakes up shortly after Jack and Alana have settled into place beside him, and when he does, it's as if they don't exist. He whimpers, unaware of Alana's softly-spoken inquiries as to how he's feeling and ignoring Jack's embarrassingly clumsy attempts at conversation as he glances anxiously around the room, heart rate spiking on the monitor above him. It's only once he understands that Hannibal is there that he finally quiets down.

"Alana, will you let Shauna know that Will's awake?" Hannibal says, moving close to slip his hand in Will's. "She was worried he wasn't eating enough."

“Of course, Hannibal.” Alana says, watching as Hannibal’s thumb begins to brush back and forth across Will’s knuckles. “I’ll be right back.”

Jack waits until she’s left the room before he speaks again. “Do you think he’ll ever recover from this, doctor?” He asks, his voice soft, as though he’s worried Will will somehow overhear him. “Do you think we’ll ever know what happened?”

Hannibal hums as though considering his question. He wonders if Jack’s asking because he’s genuinely concerned for Will or if he’s only asking because he’s more concerned he might not ever catch the Ripper if Will can’t tell him who he is.

He’s fairly sure he knows the answer.

“It’s hard to say for sure.” Hannibal says at last, reaching down to gently stroke Will’s hair. Will immediately grabs his arm and hugs it tightly to his chest. Hannibal can’t help but smile at him fondly. “We don’t know the kinds of horrors that Will faced while he was with the Ripper, Jack.” He reminds him quietly. “It could be months or even years before we hear him speak again, and even then, Will might not ever fully recover from the trauma of what happened to him. It’s important you understand that.”

If the look on Jack’s face is anything to go by, he does not accept this answer in the slightest, and he’s just opened his mouth, no doubt to tell Hannibal so, when the door behind him opens, and Shauna comes bustling inside, Alana following behind her.

“Well, look who’s awake.” She says, smiling at Will, who lies content and quiet on his pillow, blinking languidly at Hannibal. “Can I take a quick look at you, sweetie? I just need to make sure you’re okay.”

Will doesn’t answer or respond to her in any way, but immediately begins to whine when Hannibal steps back and out of her way.

“I know, sweetie, I’m sorry.” Shauna tells him, quickly pressing the bell of her stethoscope against his chest. “I’m almost done. It’s alright. You’re alright. He’s right there, sweetie, it’s okay. He’s not leaving you, I promise.”

She works with swift and gentle fingers, but even so, Will’s very close to tears by the time she pulls away. He inhales a shuddering breath as Hannibal moves quickly to his side.

“Will.” Hannibal murmurs, taking Will’s hand once more in his own. “It’s alright. I’m right here. Shh.”

Will hiccups, clutching at him.

“How is he?” Alana asks as Shauna turns away. “Is he alright?”

“He’s fine.” Shauna assures her as she logs her findings in Will’s chart. “Perfect, in fact. Physically, I can’t find anything wrong with him.”

“Dr. Chilton should be here soon.” Jack says with a frown. “Perhaps he can tell us more about what might be going on.”

Hannibal had to stop himself from sneering.

He seriously doubts it.

“Let’s hope so.” He says instead, squeezing gently at Will’s hand. “For Will’s sake. I hate seeing him like this.”

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Dr. Chilton arrives just as Will is finishing his lunch, and Jack goes down to meet him at the door while Shauna works to get Will ready. She detaches him from all his leads and unlocks the safety railings that surround his bed, with Will either unaware or completely uninterested in what's happening around him. Once he's free, Hannibal then lifts him from the bed, Will whimpering and clinging to him tightly as he lowers him carefully down to the wheelchair that sits waiting by his bed.

"It's alright, Will." Hannibal reassures him as he settles him in place. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be with you the entire time, I promise."

"Goodbye, Will." Shauna says, crouching down so she can look him in the eye. "It was very nice to meet you, and I'm so glad that I could help take care of you while you were here." She smiles at him sadly. "I'm sure gonna miss you, hun."

Will's eyes wander vaguely towards her own, and while he doesn't quite meet her gaze, he comes very close. Shauna takes his hand and squeezes it gently.

"You take care of yourself. Alright?" She asks, and waits a couple moments before she lets him go. "Is there anything I can do for you before you go?" She asks both Hannibal and Alana as she rises to her feet.

"I don't believe so." Hannibal tells her as he unlocks the wheelchair with his foot. "I think we're ready."

"Thank you for all your help." Alana tells her with a smile that doesn't fully meet her eyes. She's been quiet since Jack left, and no doubt angry at the thought of giving Will to Frederick Chilton's care. "You've been very good to him, and I think I speak for everyone when I say we're so grateful for everything you've done."

"Think nothing of it." Shauna says, gazing worriedly at Will. "I only wish I could have done more."

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Hannibal makes sure to keep a hand on Will as he wheels him from his room and down the hall, Alana following close beside him the entire time. She's quiet, biting at her lip as he maintains a litany of reassurances to Will, and it's only once they've stepped inside the elevator and the doors have closed behind them that she finally speaks.

"You can't honestly believe that putting Will in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane is the best thing for him." She demands, glaring poisonously at Hannibal.

"Of course I don't." Hannibal assures her with a sigh, gazing at their skewed reflections in the shiny, silver doors. "But what else can we do, Alana? Where is he supposed to go?"

"Anywhere." Alana says as the elevator comes slowly to a halt. "Literally *anywhere* else."

"You know as well as I do that Will is going to require considerable care and extensive therapy for quite some time, Alana." Hannibal reminds her gently as the elevator doors spring open. "That's not something he could afford if Frederick Chilton wasn't offering to waive the bill."

"I just think there must be *something* else we can do." Alana huffs as they wheel Will down the hall to the examination room where Frederick Chilton is waiting. "Something that we've overlooked."

"Believe me, Alana." Hannibal sighs before bringing Will inside. "I don't think there is."

+++

Chilton isn't in the room when they arrive, much to Hannibal's surprise.

"Where's Frederick?" He asks Jack, who's busy pacing back and forth across the room.

“Grabbing something from his car.” Jack tells him, sounding distracted. “How’s Will? Is he ready?”

“Considering he doesn’t have a choice, I’d say he is.” Alana spits, glaring at him.

Jack heaves a sigh.

“Dr. Bloom, please. I understand your concern, but this honestly what’s best-”

“No, it’s what’s best for you.” She cuts him off, disgusted. “You want complete control of Will while he’s still vulnerable, so you’re putting him in the custody of a man who will give you what you want, a man who’s openly admitted multiple times that he wants to use Will for his own personal gain. That’s all this is, and I won’t be a part of it-”

“Then you can leave.” Jack snaps, gazing at her coldly. “You’re here by invitation, by courtesy, Dr. Bloom. Please don’t interrupt me again.”

A few moments of chilly silence pass as Alana looks at him with hate, and Hannibal pretends to shift uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“Come on, Will.” He murmurs quietly, crouching down to help Will to his feet. “Let’s get you ready for Dr. Chilton.”

He tucks Will close against his side as he guides him from the wheelchair and up onto the examination table, which sits sanitized and cold. Will seems to sense that something’s wrong, and grabs at Hannibal before he has the chance to move away.

“Shh.” Hannibal shushes him, stroking at his hair. “It’s alright, Will. Dr. Chilton just wants to have a look at you, that’s all. He wants to try and help you.”

Alana snorts at that, and Jack moves pointedly away from her to stand beside Hannibal by the table.

“At some point, you‘re going to have to leave the room.” He mutters quietly to Hannibal. “It’s important for Chilton to see how just attached Will is to you, and for him to understand that if he has any chance of getting anywhere with him, then he’s going to need us just as much as we need him.”

“Of course, Jack.” Hannibal tells him, having absolutely no intention of doing what he asks. “Don’t worry, I’m sure th-”

“Sorry I’m late!” Chilton calls suddenly and loudly as he comes sweeping in the room, an enormous leather bag clutched tightly in his hand. “Forgot my…” He trails off, and seems surprised to see the room is much more crowded since he left it. “Ah, good you’re all here.” He says, closing the door quietly behind him. “Great. Then I suppose we can get started. Is Will ready?”

“Ready when you are, doctor.” Jack says, and Hannibal is surprised when he seems to step protectively in front of him. “Just be aware, he’s in a very fragile state.”

“Yes, yes, I’ve reviewed Dr. Thatcher’s notes.” Chilton answers haughtily as he sets his bag down on the counter. “They were more or less helpful. But I think I’ll gain a much better understanding of what’s happening once I have the chance to examine him myself-”

Will makes a soft noise then, something between a whimper and a sob, and both Jack and Hannibal turn to find that tears are streaming down his face. His lip is trembling violently as he then begins to shake.

“Will?” Hannibal asks him quietly. “Are you alright?”

Will doesn’t answer him at first. He just makes the same choking sound as before.

“Will.” Jack tries next, and takes another step toward him. “What’s wrong?”

Will opens his mouth, and exhales a small and shaky breath. Across the room, Alana glances at him worriedly.

“I-I-It’s him.” He says, so softly and unsteady that at first they don’t quite catch just what it is he’s saying. “It’s him.” He says again, a little clearer than he did before. “I-It’s him. It’s him. *It’s him* !”

He begins to sob, loudly and hysterically, as Jack attempts to calm him down.

“It’s alright.” He says, pulling Will forcibly against his chest, trying to muffle his piercing wails. “Calm down. You’re alright.”

What Will does next is so quick and unexpected that for a moment, Hannibal questions if it really happened.

Will grabs Jack’s gun from its holster and twists away, taking aim at Dr. Chilton’s head. He fires - the first and only time he’s ever pulled a trigger - and the moment that he does, there’s a sudden burst of light and sound, followed by a spray of blood against the wall as Chilton collapses to the ground.

+++

Jack finds Hannibal the same place that he left him, sitting in the chair beside Will’s bed.

“How is he?” He asks softly, nodding at Will’s sleeping figure. “Did he finally calm down?”

“They had to sedate him.” Hannibal tells him, watching the steady rise and fall of Will’s chest. “They were worried that he’d hurt himself if they didn’t.”

Jack nods again, moving further in the room.

"Chilton's still in surgery." He says, his voice soft. "It's a bit early to say for sure, but they don't think the bullet managed to hit anything vital. There's a chance he may pull through."

Well, if you're going to get shot through the face, the best place for it to happen would be an emergency room . Hannibal thinks hatefully to himself. He makes sure to keep his expression vaguely worried as he offers Jack a nod.

"I'm glad to hear it." He says, and in this, at least, he's being honest. The thought of Frederick Chilton having to live with only half his face is putting him in an excellent humor.

Jack seems to hesitate before he moves further in the room.

"I've been thinking a lot about what happened." He admits slowly, sinking down into the empty seat beside Hannibal's. "About Will's reaction to Chilton right before he shot him, and what Alana said about Chilton wanting Will for his own gain. And I think…I think it's something to seriously consider."

"What do you mean?" Hannibal asks him, glancing at him from the corner of his eye. "Consider what?"

"What if…what if Frederick Chilton is the Chesapeake Ripper?"

Hannibal scoffs. "Jack." He says, shaking his head. "Will's confused. He's suffered an enormous trauma-"

"No, no, just think about it." Jack says urgently, brow furrowing as he folds his hands together, elbows pressing on the arm rests of his chair. "He fits the profile. We always said that the Chesapeake Ripper was a doctor, specifically a psychiatrist or a neurologist."

Hannibal doesn't bother pointing out to him that the FBI has in fact been operating under the assumption that the Ripper was a surgeon for months, and that the possibility of him being a neurologist or a psychiatrist was only something he suggested a few days earlier on a hunch.

"Chilton's been wanting to study Will from the moment that he met him." Jack goes on, apparently unbothered by Hannibal's silence. "He would have had motive to take him."

"But even if that were true, then why let him go?" Hannibal asks him, purely for the sake of having fun. "If Chilton had an opportunity to take him, to study Will the way he always wanted to, why would he let him go again after keeping him for months? Why not just simply kill him?"

"Because he couldn't. The Ripper is a sociopath and a narcissist, but he's far from stupid." Jack reminds him. "He knew he couldn't publish anything on Will, at least, not without attracting unwanted suspicion to himself. He knew that he could never profit off of anything from Will so long as he was missing."

"What are you saying, Jack?" Hannibal asks him, doing everything he can to sound utterly exhausted. "What exactly is it that you think happened?"

"What if Will realized Chilton was Ripper and confronted him?" Jack asks him excitedly, evidently forgetting all about the list of surgeons that the Ripper's victims had (at some point) come in contact with, and the fact that Frederick Chilton wasn't on that list. "What if he took Will, knowing just how much he stood to gain from studying him, and realized later there was a way for him to get exactly what he wanted? He could have wiped Will's memory - as a psychiatrist, he'd know how - and then released him back to us again, because he somehow *knew* that Will would have a breakdown and we'd come begging for his help? Once we did, he'd then have complete control of Will and all the fame and fortune he ever wanted, and no one, *no one* , would ever suspect a thing."

Hannibal stares flatly at him for several moments. "Jack, you have to realize just how far-fetched that sounds." He says at last, completely unimpressed.

"I know it does." Jack tells him, rising once more to his feet. "But even so, I just can't shake the feeling that I'm right."

“Hmm.” Hannibal hums, turning his attention back to Will. “And just what are you planning to do with that feeling now?”

“I’ve already spoken to a judge in Baltimore.” Jack tells him, moving back across the room. “I told him I have reason to suspect that Frederick Chilton is the Chesapeake Ripper, and that there may be evidence to prove it at his house. That’s probable cause - he’s agreed to grant me a search and seizure warrant.”

“It’s already in effect?” Hannibal asks him.

“Yes.”

“When do you leave?”

“Soon.” Jack tells him. “I’m just waiting for my forensics team to get everything they need, and then we’re heading up to Baltimore together. They should be here any minute.”

Hannibal is quiet for a moment.

“Good luck, Jack.” He says at last, watching with a smile as Jack reaches for the door. “I hope, for all our sakes, you’re right, and that you find everything you’re looking for. Maybe then we can finally put this nightmare behind us.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!!!

The final chapter will be posted TOMORROW afternoon!

See you then!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

This is it!

The final chapter!

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wakes to a dry mouth and a bad taste on his tongue. It takes him a few tries before he finally manages to open his eyes, and when he does, the world spins like a Tilt-A-Whirl around him. He quickly shuts his gummy eyes with a groan.

“Will?” A vaguely familiar, accented voice calls to him softly. “Can you hear me? Are you alright?”

Will manages a weak nod and an even weaker croak that’s meant to be a ‘yes’.

“Here.” The voice says, and Will feels something plastic touch his lips. “Drink some water.”

Will does as he’s instructed and opens his mouth, too desperate to be embarrassed as he suckles at the straw. The water is cool against his burning throat, and he gulps it gratefully.

“Easy, Will.” The voice whispers. “Slow down - you’re going to make yourself sick.”

But Will ignores him, and swallows down another generous mouthful. He whines a moment later when the straw is taken gently from his lips.

“Shh.” The voice soothes him. “That’s enough for now. You can have more in a little bit.”

Will cautiously cracks an eye, and finds Dr. Lecter leaning over him, looking worried.

“Dr. Lecter?” He asks, his voice soft, unsure. Dr. Lecter smiles warmly down at him.

“Hello, Will.” He says softly. “How are you feeling?”

Will swallows thickly, staring up at him. He’s dressed in an elegant gray-and-red plaid suit that would look ridiculous on anyone else, and his silver hair is carefully slicked back. It seems unfair that he should look so effortlessly put-together when Will is wearing nothing but a too-short hospital gown and what he’s pretty sure is a diaper underneath.

“F-fine.” He says as memories of the day before come slowly trickling back. He remembers, vaguely, hearing Frederick Chilton’s voice as though from a great distance, and the overwhelming terror it inspired. He remembers cold metal in his hand, and the sound of a gunshot, and being wrapped in Dr. Lecter’s arms, wailing loudly into his chest as doctors and nurses came pouring in the room. He remembers someone flipping up his gown, and the sharp sting of a needle, and after that, a sudden cut to black.

Will cringes where he lays, and sneaks embarrassed glances up at Dr. Lecter.

“Where’s…where’s Crawford?” He mumbles as he looks around the room.

“Last I heard, he was in Baltimore.” Dr. Lecter says, reaching down to push a stray curl back from Will’s forehead. Will has to stop himself from leaning into the touch. “Raiding Dr. Chilton’s house. But I believe he was planning on coming back to see you later this morning.”

Will nods a little, chewing at his lip. “Chilton?” He asks, voice thin with fear and shaking.

“He’s down in the ICU.” Dr. Lecter reassures him as he pulls away. “In a medically induced coma. Handcuffed to his bed.” He cocks his head. “He can’t hurt you anymore, Will.”

Will releases the breath he didn’t even realize he was holding and slumps back against his pillows with a sigh. He tries not to squirm under Dr. Lecter’s piercing gaze.

“T-Thank you.” He tells him, avoiding his eyes as he fiddles with a loose thread on his sheets.

“For what, Will?” Dr. Lecter asks him, sounding amused.

“For…for everything.” Will says, because though the details of the past few days are hazy, he has the sense that Dr. Lecter has been around for most of them, and has spent much of that time doting on him religiously. His cheeks flush at the thought. “I…It means a lot.” He adds lamely.

“Think nothing of it, Will.” Dr. Lecter tells him smoothly. “I’m just glad that you’re alright.” He cocks his head. “Are you hungry?”

Will hesitates, and then he shyly nods. In fact, he’s starving.

“I’ll let your nurse know.” Dr. Lecter tells him in that same gentle tone as before. “She’ll be happy to hear you’re awake - she’s been very worried about you.”

Will nods, miserable at the thought of being such an inconvenience for so many different people, and watches Dr. Lecter as he slips quietly from the room.

It’s only once he’s gone that Will allows himself to cry.

+++

Shauna is nothing short of thrilled so see Will awake and talking once again, and spends several minutes fussing over him (much to Will's embarrassment) before insisting that she check him over. Dr. Lecter watches like a hawk as she examines him, nodding as she calls her findings back over her shoulder, and once she's done, Shauna then brings for Will a breakfast tray that's overflowing with food.

"Here, baby." She says, ignoring Will's weak protests as she lays it on his lap. "Try and eat as much as you can, and if there's anything you want or need, just hit the call button. Make sure he eats all of it." She then tells Dr. Lecter sternly, who's sitting in the chair beside Will's bed and looking like he's trying not to laugh. "I don't want no excuses, especially after yesterday."

"Of course." Dr. Lecter assures her with a wink. "Don't worry, Shauna, I won't let him skip another meal."

Will has never been the cause for anyone's concern before, and finds he hates the role immensely. He's quiet as he pokes around the contents of his breakfast tray, uncomfortable with the weight of Dr. Lecter's gaze as watches Will push food around his plate.

"You…you don't have to stay with me, Dr. Lecter." Will tells him. "I'm fine."

"I know." Dr. Lecter says simply. "But I want to."

"Don't you have patients?" Will asks, snapping at him because he hates to be so vulnerable. "Shouldn't you be back in Baltimore helping them instead of watching me eat?"

Dr. Lecter smiles at him slightly. "They can wait."

He says it so gently that Will immediately deflates, ashamed.

“A-are you hungry?” He says next, nudging his tray a little closer to Dr. Lecter. It’s the closest he can come to an apology without actually saying so. “Do you want some?”

He steals a nervous glance at him, and sees that Dr. Lecter is looking at him fondly, his eyes soft.

“No thank you, Will.” He says. “I’d much prefer you eat it - you need it.” When Will still hesitates, his smile curls into a smirk. “Don’t make me call Shauna back in here.”

Will quickly shoves a spoon of oatmeal in his mouth, and can’t help but grimace at the bland taste.

“You made the right call.” He tells Dr. Lecter, swallowing it down.

“Not good, I take it?”

“No.”

Dr. Lecter chuckles. “Would you like me to pick you up something else?”

“No.” Will says again before he’s even finished speaking. “You’ve already done enough.”

“I don’t mind doing more.” Dr. Lecter says serenely. “Really, Will, it’s no trouble if it means getting you something that you want.”

“No, *really* , Dr. Lecter.” Will echoes him, his cheeks hot with the attention he’s receiving. “I’m fine.” He heaves a sigh, hands shaking slightly where they’re wrapped around his spoon. “Perfectly fine.”

Dr. Lecter doesn't answer. He just watches as Will trembles, trying not to fall apart.

+++

An hour later, Will lies full and sleepy underneath the warmth and safety of his sheets, blinking slowly at the ceiling as Dr. Lecter sits beside him, reading quietly aloud a battered copy of *Paradise Lost* .

"'The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven…'"

Will listens to the soothing cadence of his voice, fighting sleep, as the remnants of the sedative swirl weakly through his veins.

"'Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign is worth ambition, though in Hell: better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven!'"

Will sighs, his eyelids fluttering, and feels Dr. Lecter take his hand in his.

"'In this unhappy mansion'," He reads, thumb stroking back and forth across Will's knuckles, "Or once more with rallied arms to try what may be yet regained in Heaven or what more lost in Hell?'"

Will is just on the verge of sleep when the door suddenly creaks open, and someone steps inside. Will thinks at first it's Shauna, coming to check up on him again, but then he hears a deep voice whisper from across the room.

"Is he asleep?"

Will is instantly awake, sitting upright on the bed.

“I’m awake. I’m awake.” He says, rubbing at his eyes. Beside him, Dr. Lecter heaves a tiny sigh.

“Hey, Will.” Jack greets him warmly. “It’s good to hear your voice again. How are you feeling?”

“Good.” Will tells him, not sure who he’s trying to convince more - himself or Jack. “They’re letting me leave after lunch.”

“Good, good.” Jack says, sounding distracted. “I’m glad to hear it.”

There’s a brief and slightly awkward pause.

“Dr. Lecter.” Jack says at last, turning toward him. “Would you mind giving me and Will a few minutes alone? There’s something I need to speak with him about.”

Dr. Lecter eyes him narrowly. “Considering the last time that you tried to talk about what happened to him, Jack,” He says slowly. “I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

“I’m fine, Dr. Lecter.” Will is quick to reassure him, because the only thing worse than being the cause for concern is being the cause of an outright problem. “Really, I’m okay now. I’m okay.”

Dr. Lecter doesn’t seem convinced. He studies Will a moment longer, his expression unnervingly blank, and after several seconds pass, rises slowly to his feet. “I’ll be at the nurses’ station down the hall.” He says to Will. “If you need anything, just hit the call button.”

Will quickly nods to show he understands, and keeps his eyes fixed strictly down as Dr. Lecter leaves the room. As soon as the door shuts quietly behind him, Jack moves to take his place in the chair beside Will’s bed.

“I just got back from Baltimore.” Jack tells him, lowering himself carefully down into his seat. “We’ve been up all night, going over every inch of Frederick Chilton’s house.”

Will flinches at the name, a fact Jack doesn’t miss.

“Will.” He says softly, leaning forward just a bit. “Have you recovered your memories? Do you remember what happened to you?”

Will shakes his head. “Not really.” He whispers, bitter that Jack seems unwilling to upset him only *after* the breakdown he induced.

“Well, what *do* you remember?”

Will inhales. It’s shaky, shuddering. “I remember,” He says slowly. “Waking in a dark room. And someone standing over me. I remember hearing Chilton’s voice telling me to stay calm, that I was safe, and that there was a bright light flashing behind him.”

He shudders, and swallows down a sob. Across from him, Jack nods, watching him closely.

“When we were searching Chilton’s house,” He says, more gently than before. “We found a guest bedroom in his basement. There were several strands of hair on the pillow that match the samples we took from you, and a pair of soft reatraints were underneath the bed. There was blood on the cuffs, Will. *Your* blood.”

Jack waits a moment, as Will gasps quietly for breath.

“And that’s not all we found.” He goes on to tell him. “In Chilton’s bathroom, there were several different medications in his cabinet - sodium amytal, midazolam, scopolamine…all things that can be used as sedatives, hypnotics, and amnestics.”

Will blinks up at him, confused.

“Dr. Lecter thinks your memory loss was drug-induced, Will.” Jack explains to him gently. “That Chilton might have done something to make you forget what happened to you.”

“But…but why?” Will asks him, horrified.

“We’re not sure. We’re hoping we’ll know more when he wakes up, and we have the chance to question him about it.”

“He won’t cooperate.” Will informs him. “Chilton’s dumb, but he’s not that dumb. He’s not gonna tell you anything.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Jack says with a shrug. “There’s more than enough evidence to convict him.” Jack smiles at him slightly. “You did good, Will.” He tells him. “You helped us finally catch him.”

Will tries to smile back, but finds he can’t quite manage. It’s a victory that feels much more hollow than the one he was expecting.

He fiddles with the string tie on his hospital gown.

“So what happens now?” He asks Jack next. “After we arrest Chilton, what’s gonna happen?”

Jack seems to stiffen slightly in his seat. “Chilton is going to need some time to recover.” He says slowly. “After he wakes up and we formally charge him with kidnapping, he’ll be transferred to a maximum security prison. It will take some time before his case gets taken to trial.”

“And what about me?” Will asks him, heart fluttering nervously in his chest. “Am I gonna be helping you build a case against him?”

Jack hesitates a moment. “No, Will.” He says. “No, we won’t ask for you to be involved in that.”

Will frowns at that. “So…so am I just gonna go back to the Academy and finish the semester?” He asks, confused.

The look on Jack’s face is enough to make his fluttering heart sink.

“Am…am I gonna have to repeat the course?” Will asks, dismayed. “Because I missed so much?”

Jack heaves a sigh. “No, Will.” He says, shaking his head. “You’re not repeating it.”

“Then what? What’s gonna happen to me?”

Jack doesn’t answer him at first.

“Will, we…we looked for you. For several weeks, we looked for you. We did everything we could to try and find you, but after a while…we just weren’t finding anything, kid. The higher ups were getting impatient. They said I was wasting time and resources and that there were other things I needed to be doing. The FBI declared you dead, Will.”

Will stares at him, refusing to believe it.

“W… *what* ?”

“It’s alright.” Jack tells him, holding out a hand. “We’ll take care of that, don’t worry. It’s not going to affect you in any way.”

“But I don’t understand.” Will says, blood pounding in his ears. “Why does that matter?”

Jack heaves another sigh.

“You need to understand, Will, how this looks. This whole thing has been very embarrassing for the FBI - one of our own trainees was abducted. We couldn’t find him, we had to declare him dead, and then lo and behold, he turns up fine a few weeks later.” He looks at Will with pity. “You were a liability to begin with, Will. With your condition, you never would have been accepted into the Academy if I hadn’t stepped in and pulled some strings. And after everything that’s happened, the higher ups, they…they just want this whole thing to go away. They’ve decided they won’t accept you back at the Academy.”

Will feels as though the ground drops out from under him.

“ *What* ?” He breathes, staring at him.

“I’m sorry, Will. Lord knows I wish that this had gone a different way, but…maybe it’s for the best.” He offers Will a smile that seems strained. “There’s other jobs you can still have with the FBI, Will.” He tells him. “You could be a teacher, or a consultant-”

“But you said I’d be an agent - *you swore* !”

Jack hesitates.

“I’m sorry, Will.” He says again. “That’s something I never should have promised you. The odds were against you from the start.”

So saying, he then rises to his feet.

“Take care of yourself, Will.” He tells him, with an awkward pat on Will’s silently heaving shoulders. “I hope we’ll meet again someday. Under different, better circumstances.”

Will doesn’t answer him.

He’s crying far too hard to even try.

+++

Beverly stops by while Will is waiting to be discharged, a box of clothing in her arms.

“It’s yours.” She explains, setting it before him. “After you went missing, we raided your dorm room at the Academy - thought there might have been some clue to tell us where you were, but we never found anything.” She watches as Will shifts through his belongings, biting at her lip. “Jack wanted me to throw it away.” She tells him then. “After you were declared dead. I think he didn’t want to look at it anymore. I get it - too painful - but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” Will tells her, pulling out a pair of jeans and a well-worn flannel shirt. He looks up at her. “Thanks, Beverly. Really.”

She nods, still looking guilty.

“We never found your wallet.” She tells him. “It was lost when you were taken. You’re gonna need to get another copy of your driver’s license. And probably open a new bank account.” Will bites back a groan at that, realizing for the first time since he’s woken up he doesn’t have a penny to his name. “We got you this.” Beverly confesses in a rush, shoving a handful of bills under his nose. “We all chipped in, everyone in the forensics department. It’s not much, but we hoped it might help until you can get back on your feet.”

There's a part of Will, the part that still remembers the shame of being poor, that bristles at the thought of handouts-

But Will's smart enough to know he's not in any position to refuse this one this time.

He takes the money, hating himself, and can't quite meet her eye.

"Thank you." He croaks, trying hard to keep his voice from shaking.

"Please don't thank me, Will." She tells him, looking just as miserable as him. "I don't deserve it." When Will questioningly back up at her, she sighs. "We couldn't save you. We gave up on you." She hesitates, chewing at her lip. "We…we didn't protect you. Not like we should've. I'm…I'm sorry, Will. I'm so sorry. About everything."

"Don't be." Will tells her with a shaky smile that feels more like a grimace. "It wasn't your fault. None of it."

A couple beats of awkward silence pass.

"So, um." Beverly says, glancing around the room. "Do you need a ride back to Quantico?"

"A ride back?" Will echoes, looking over at her. "What for?"

"We still have your car in evidence." Beverly reminds him. "But Jack's released it for you, so you can pick it up now, if you want. Do you want a ride over? I'm heading back there anyway."

Will wants nothing more than to accept, pride and lack of driver's license be damned.

He’s just not sure he can set foot inside Quantico without burning it to the ground.

He shakes his head.

“No thanks, Bev.” He says. “I, uh, I’ll come by another time.”

Beverly seems to know he’s lying, but she pretends as if he’s not.

“Alright.” She tells him, looking sad. “Don’t forget about us. Okay, Will? Come by some time and see us. There’s always a place for you at the lab.”

It’s a lie, and they both know it - there is no place for Will there anymore.

There’s no place for him anywhere…

Will smiles at her, and it feels strained. “Really, Bev.” He says, because ‘goodbye’ is far too final. “Thanks.”

+++

There’s a small area around the side of the hospital where several benches are gathered around a little plot of brown grass and a couple barren bushes.

Will thinks that it’s supposed to be a garden.

What he knows is that it’s deserted.

Will is quick to settle himself on one of the benches, and sets his box of everything he owns beside him. He shivers in the cold - along with his wallet, his only coat was evidently also lost the day he was taken, and the only sweatshirt he has is one from the Academy.

And Will's not exactly in the mood to be advertising that at the moment.

He sighs, and tucks his arms around him tightly.

He has no idea where to go, or just what he's supposed to do - there's nowhere for him to go, he has no friends that he can turn to, and no family he can ask for help. He has a high school diploma, a bachelor of science degree, and a lifetime's experience fixing boat motors, but not much else in terms of practical skills. He has only a couple hundred dollars to his name, and cab fees and hotels rooms will drain that money quick. He could stay at cheap motels, the kind he remembers from his childhood, with rust stains in the tub and cockroaches in the corner, but Will's not sure that he can handle that right now.

In short, Will is feeling very sorry for himself as he sits there stiff with cold among the gnarled tangles of the half-dead rose bushes. He knows that he's not doing himself any favors by moping, and that he should be waiting by the bus stop over by the entrance, but Will just can't bring himself to do it.

"Will?"

Will can't help but jump, and looks up to see that Dr. Lecter is moving swiftly towards him, his face twisted with concern. Will shifts a little in his seat, feeling terribly guilty - after Jack left, he had refused all visitors but Beverly. From what Shauna told him, Dr. Lecter had been especially upset by that.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter." He says, trying to sound braver than he feels. "You're still here?"

"I went up to your room and you were gone." Dr. Lecter tells him with a frown. "What are you doing out here?"

“They discharged me.” Will tells him, looking at his shoes. “No point hanging around.”

Nevermind the fact that that’s precisely what he’s doing.

“Where’s your coat?” Dr. Lecter demands, as though he didn’t hear him. “Are you alright? Will, you’re shaking - poor boy, you must be freezing!”

And before Will can protest, he then takes his own coat from his shoulders and drapes it like a blanket over Will.

“Dr. Lecter-” Will begins, pleading.

“Hush.” Dr. Lecter scolds him, taking Will by the arms. “Here, come with me. We need to get you somewhere warm-”

“No, I’m fine.” Will says, pulling away. “Really, Dr. Lecter, I’m fine.”

“You are *not* fine.” Dr. Lecter tells him firmly. “You were just in the hospital-”

“I just got *out* of the hospital.”

“Nevertheless.” Dr. Lecter says. “You shouldn’t push yourself.” He cocks his head. “Do you need a ride back to the Academy?” He asks him gently.

Will can’t help but flinch at that.

He looks away.

“No.” He spits, glaring at the ground.

Dr. Lecter waits, and after a few seconds pass, Will heaves a sigh.

“They kicked me out.” He says, glancing at him anxiously.

Dr. Lecter blinks.

His expression is impossible to read.

“Ah.” He says at last. “I see.” He frowns, however slightly. “I’m sorry to hear that, Will. I’m sure you must be disappointed.”

Will shrugs. “I’m fine.” He says again, nudging at a pebble by his feet. “It’s fine.”

Dr. Lecter shakes his head. “No, it’s not.” He tells him. “None of this ever should have happened to you, Will.”

Will’s not sure what he means - meeting Jack, joining the FBI? Getting taken by the Ripper?

Being abandoned?

Again?

Will bites his lip.

He doesn’t trust himself to speak.

From where he stands, Dr. Lecter is watching him closely. “Will, is there anyone you can call?” He asks him.

Will shakes his head, his eyes burning.

“Do you have anywhere you can go?”

Again, Will shakes his head, and inhales a shaky breath.

Dr. Lecter seems to hesitate.

“Why don’t you come home with me?” He asks Will gently, taking a small step closer to him. “I have a spare bedroom you can use-”

Will is shaking his head before the words are even out of his mouth.

“No, Dr. Lecter.” He says firmly. “You’ve done so much for me already-”

“And I’ve told you that I don’t mind doing more.” Dr. Lecter tells him, as placid as the surface of a lake. “Really, Will, it’s no trouble.” He waits, and when Will doesn’t answer, he cocks his head. “Let me help you, Will.” He says, his voice soft. “Come back with me to Baltimore. Please. For my sake - I can’t bear the thought of you alone after everything that’s happened to you.”

Will chews his lip, debating.

Baltimore is on the water…

There’s ports and shipyards there. It’s known for it…

Maybe…maybe he can find work, either on the docks or fixing boats and engines just like he never wanted. Maybe…maybe he can start over. Work there for a little while, just long enough to save some money, and then rebuild his life the way he wants to somewhere else.

Will heaves a sigh and nods reluctantly.

Dr. Lecter beams.

“Come with me, Will.” He says cheerfully, helping him to his feet. “My car is just over here…”

+++

Will spends most of the trip to Baltimore asleep, lulled by Dr. Lecter’s heated seats. He wakes up just as they’re pulling off the I-95, and devotes the rest of the drive to Dr. Lecter’s house apologizing.

“It’s alright, Will.” Dr. Lecter reassures him for the hundredth time he turns into his driveway. “You’re still recovering.”

He’s quick to get Will’s door, despite Will’s best attempts to reassure him that he doesn’t have to.

“I want to.” Dr. Lecter says simply as he helps Will to his feet. “You’ve been through enough as it is.”

Will is starting to feel overwhelmed as Dr. Lecter steers him toward the house.

“Are you hungry?” He asks, keeping an arm looped protectively around Will even as they step inside. “You haven’t eaten much over the past few days.”

“I’m alright, Dr. Lecter.” Will tells him, desperate not to be a burden. “I’m used to not eating much.”

This, apparently, is the wrong thing to say, because Dr. Lecter’s lips immediately thin.

“Yes, I’m aware.” He says unhappily, leading Will down the hall and over to a dark and lonely sitting room, where two chairs sit waiting by the fireplace. “Sit down, dear boy. Let’s get you comfortable.”

Will allows himself to be lowered carefully down into the plush folds of Dr. Lecter’s chair, blushing furiously the entire time.

“Can I get you anything?” Dr. Lecter asks, straightening to his full height once again. “Water? Coffee?”

“Just water’s fine.” Will says. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Dr. Lecter tells him with a smile. “I’ll be right back.”

Will waits until he’s disappeared from view before slumping back against the cushion, glancing curiously around the room. It’s rather moody, despite the yellow wallpaper - the curtains have been drawn, and the shadows hang heavy overhead. There’s a taxidermied ram’s head over the fireplace, and deer skulls resting on the desk. Will’s gaze wanders from their twisted horns to the paintings hanging on the walls and over to the harpsichord that’s just beside him.

He blinks, staring at the little metronome that’s sitting on the spine, staring ominously up at him…

Will can’t explain it, but he feels as though he’s seen it before…

It’s almost like he’s half-expecting it to do something…

The sound of leather shoes clicking on the hardwood brings him abruptly back to earth.

“Here we are, Will.” Dr. Lecter calls as he comes sweeping in the room once more, a glass of water in his hand. “Is there anything else I can bring you?”

“Uh, no…no thank you, Dr. Lecter.” Will says, accepting the glass. He glances over at the metronome again.

“Is there anything you’d like for dinner?”

It takes Will a moment to respond.

“Oh, um…no, Dr. Lecter, I’ll have anything.” He says vaguely, still gazing at the little device. “I’m not picky.”

Dr. Lecter looks from Will to the metronome and back again. “Something wrong, Will?”

Will shakes his head. “No.” He says, voice barely more than a whisper.

From the corner of his eye, Dr. Lecter looks amused. “Do you like my metronome?” He asks, moving from Will’s side and over to the harpsichord.

Will licks his lips.

“Not really.” He says, watching warily as Dr. Lecter reaches for it.

(They say honesty’s the best policy, and even if it wasn’t, Will gets the sense that Dr. Lecter is a human divining rod for the truth).

Dr. Lecter smirks.

“That’s understandable.” He says as he flicks the switch. Immediately, the pendulum lights up, and then begins to swing. “It’s quite obnoxious.”

Will stares at it, rooted to the spot and completely mesmerized.

“You…you use that to practice music?” He asks, barely aware of Dr. Lecter as he comes slowly back to Will.

“No.” He tells him, before kneeling at Will’s feet. “I use it for hypnotherapy.”

His voice sounds as though it’s coming from somewhere very far away, despite the fact that he and Will are just inches apart.

Will blinks, trying to remember what he said.

“Hypnotherapy?” He echoes dreamily after a moment, watching as the pendulum swings slowly back and forth.

“Yes.” Dr. Lecter whispers. “It’s a therapeutic technique designed to induce a deep, trance-like state of relaxation and focused concentration.”

Will knows what hypnotherapy is. They learned about it at the Academy. He wants to tell Dr. Lecter that, but his thoughts are fleeting, hard to catch, and he forgets what he's about to say a moment later.

Instead, he merely hums, still gazing at the flashing light.

It seems so familiar.

Like an old, recurring nightmare.

Dr. Lecter's hands reach out to take the glass from him before returning to his knees, rubbing at them comfortingly.

"Among being used to treat different phobias and behavioral conditions," He goes on, "It can also be used to aid in memory recovery. And in altering a person's state of consciousness."

Something prickles uneasily at the back of Will's mind, begging for attention, but it's gone as quickly as it comes.

In his periphery, Will sees Dr. Lecter lean in close.

" *Close your eyes* ." He breathes, and Will's eyes immediately flutter shut.

It's dark.

The only thing he hears is the distant ticking of the metronome and the quiet tide of his own breathing.

Feel the heaviness in your limbs.

No sooner than the words are spoken, Will is suddenly aware of the weight of his own presence.

Imagine yourself in a safe…and relaxing place . The darkness seems to tell him, and hazy, half-formed memories of strong arms around him, the faint smell of bergamot and rum, filter slowly through Will's mind.

Safe to relax…completely.

The darkness seems to yawn, contracting close around him, enfolding him in its black embrace-

No matter how deeply you go, my voice will go with you .

-it swallows him whole.

Will gasps, his body going rigid before it then begins to shake. It's violent, terrifying, like the darkness that envelops him is slowly tearing him apart, and he's on the verge of shattering completely…

There are arms suddenly around him, holding him together.

Come back to me, Will. The darkness begs. *Come back to me* …

A strangled noise erupts from him then, something torn between a scream and a cry, as every muscle seizes all at once, and Will collapses on himself.

For a moment, nothing happens.

Then something seems to shift, and Will comes back in bits and pieces.

It's quiet.

Calm.

There are arms around him, cradling him close.

Will inhales a shaky breath, and slowly opens his eyes.

Hannibal is looking down at him, his face mere inches from Will's own. His whiskey eyes are crinkled with concern.

"Will?" He asks, his voice soft. "Can you hear me?"

Will blinks, staring up at him.

He smiles.

"Hannibal." He sighs, and then brings their lips together.

The kiss is long and slow and tender. Hannibal's arms are wrapped around him, drawing him close, and Will's hands are tangled in his hair.

When they finally break apart, they're both gasping desperately for breath. They cling to one another tightly, staring deep into each other's eyes.

“My love.” Hannibal whispers with the reverence of a prayer. “How I’ve missed you.”

Will smiles at him slightly, thumb stroking back and forth across his cheek.

“Is it over?” He asks him softly. “Did it work?”

“Darling, you were brilliant.” Hannibal tells him, reaching out to gently cup his cheek. “Remarkable boy - you’re finally free. From Jack. From me. From everything.”

Will heaves a sigh, and tucks his head beneath Hannibal’s throat.

“Take me away from here?” He begs him quietly, because after everything that’s happened, how far the two of them have come, he can’t bear the thought of lingering in Baltimore a single moment longer. If he’s going to stay, then he wants them to start over. “Please?”

“Of course, Will.” Hannibal says, nuzzling his curls. “Wherever you want.”

Will hums, content, and lets his eyes slip shut. He’s quiet for a moment, listening to the steady beating of Hannibal’s dark heart as he begins to sway them gently back and forth.

He’s just on the verge of drifting off to sleep when he feels Hannibal smile against the top of his head.

“Tell me, Will.” He says lightly. “Have you ever been to Florence?”

Chapter End Notes

There you have it - I hope you enjoyed it!

Thank you, thank you to everyone who read, liked, and commented on this story - I couldn't have gotten this far without your encouragement!

If there's anything you wanted me to explain/clarify about this story (because I know there's kind of a lot that's going on, especially in the last few chapters), just let me know, and I'll do my best to answer.

Goodbye for now! I hope to see you again someday - hopefully sooner rather than later.

End Notes

Will's condition is called "Hyper-Empathetic Disorder". It is entirely fictional, but based on a real condition called "Hyper-Empathy Syndrome". It's just something I created to explain certain parts of the story.

Thanks for reading!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!